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## **Knock Knock! Who's There? Exploring the Functions of Play and Humor During Bowen Family Systems Theory Training**

Helen Reynolds

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Knock Knock! Who's There?

Exploring the Functions of Play and Humor During Bowen Family Systems Theory  
Training

By

Helen Reynolds

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at Nova Southeastern University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

**Nova Southeastern University**

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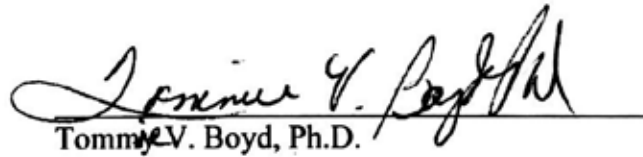
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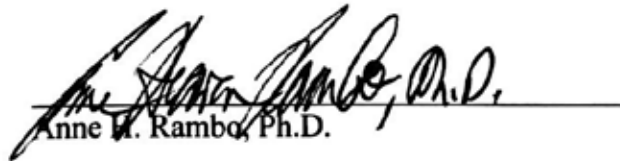
This dissertation was submitted by Helen Reynolds under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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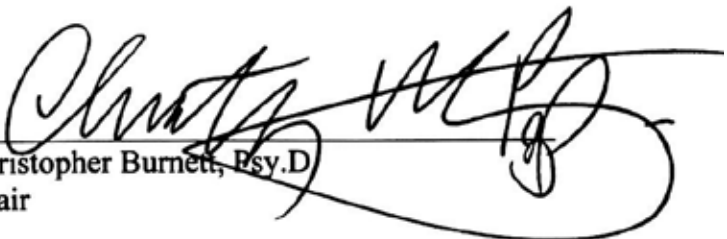
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## **Abstract**

Emerging research into the evolution of play indicates that complex social play may serve important functions in anxiety management and the development of emotional calibration. Bowen family systems theory posits that the behavior of all living things is organized by underlying emotional circuitry, and that each living system is characterized by its capacity to self regulate in relation to the reactivity of the emotional network within which it is embedded. The clinical supervisory system is often at the nexus of multiple anxious systems and its members must find ways to manage this anxious emotional field. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the functions of play and humor in supervisory systems. The study utilized the lens of Bowen family systems theory, with particular interest in Bowen's (1992) emphasis on developing the flexibility to maintain an emotional distance "between seriousness and humor" (p. 299). The findings of the study suggest that neutral objectivity; not taking oneself, others, or the situation too seriously; the emotional climate/circuit; emotional distance; and changing perspective are all significant factors in the expression of play as a manifestation of the emotional process, and are important aspects of the emergence or absence of play in the supervisory system.

Keywords: Play, humor, playfulness, clinical supervision, Bowen family systems theory

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

When she was first introduced to Bowen family systems theory, the author's allergic reaction was so strong that she swore to herself—and anyone else willing to listen—that if Bowen's ideas turned out to be correct she would give up therapy altogether. However, six months later, despite her best efforts she realized that she could no longer make sense of individual behavior outside the context of a multigenerational family emotional system. Thus, she embarked on a life-changing journey to understand Bowen's theory and to make efforts toward increasing her level of *differentiation of self*. In this endeavor, she has found that her personal experience of playfulness and humor—both with clients and her own family—has been a significant factor in: a) her acceptance and integration of Bowen theory; b) how she uses Bowen theory to inform her approach to personal and professional relationships; c) as a means of self-regulating in an attempt to develop one-to-one, person-to-person relationships; and d) as a useful indicator of her capacity to do so. Simultaneously, she has observed how she uses play and humor to: a) bind anxiety, b) succumb to togetherness, c) avoid *being a self* (Bowen, 1992), and d) overfunction for the other.

This study is a preliminary exploration of the ways in which students of Bowen family systems theory experience playfulness and humor during their learning process. The author's objective was to gain some insight into the function of play and humor as people come to Bowen's ideas, embrace them, and develop a much deeper understanding of them. Bowen (1979) himself described the importance of balancing fun and seriousness when working with clients, and through this study the author hoped to learn more about how people have utilized his ideas to develop the flexibility to have fun as

well as to be serious in a range of emotional fields. For Bowen (1992), this ability was an important component in how much a therapist becomes entangled in the family system, and the extent to which therapists can think for themselves:

The human phenomenon is serious and tragic, but, at the same time, there is a comical or humorous aspect to most situations. If the therapist is too close to the family, he can become entangled in the seriousness. If he is too distant, he is not in effective contact. The right emotional distance for the author is a point between seriousness and humor, where he can shift either way to facilitate the process in the family. (p. 229)

## **Bowen Theory**

### **Murray Bowen**

Murray Bowen “looked at something that everybody else had looked at and saw something that no one else had ever seen” (Kerr, 2002g, p. 13). He was born and raised on a working farm in a small town in Tennessee, where his father claimed to know what family a person came from by the way they walked, and could predict the weather from the moss on the trees (Bowen, 2013). As an adult he trained first as a medical doctor, serving as a surgical physician during World War II, and then as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. However, Bowen struggled with the fact that Freud’s concepts were grounded in literature, philosophy, mythology, and the arts, rather than medicine and the natural sciences. He believed that a theory could not be valid unless it could “somehow be synonymous with the universe, the earth, the tides, the seasons, the predictable cycles of life, and man as a reproductive, evolving form of life” (Bowen, 2002, p. 17). To this end he read widely in the natural sciences, but found no way to integrate his ideas until



his work at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) focused his efforts on the family instead of the individual, and allowed him to “see a completely different world” (Bowen, 2002, p. 18).

Bowen spent five years, from 1954 to 1959, on the Family Study Project at NIMH, where he conducted research on entire families living full time on a ward of the hospital. From this research, Bowen developed Bowen family systems theory, and a new science of human behavior began to emerge that conceptualized the human as a biological-evolutionary creature whose nature was inseparable from our phylogenetic development (Bowen, 2002). In keeping with the field of biology, he expanded the explanatory focus for an individual’s functioning to include the social system within which the individual exists (Kerr, 2002c). Furthermore, he hypothesized the existence of fundamental universal processes that organize the functioning of all forms of life, the manifestations of which he had observed in the family systems of his research subjects (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

### **The Emotional System**

At the foundation of Bowen family systems theory is the concept of the emotional system. Bowen’s use of the term “emotional” refers to the basic life processes that drive an organism through life, encompassing all the mechanisms involved in survival—both of the individual and of the group—that are the product of billions of years of evolution (Kerr, 1998). According to Bowen (1992), the emotional system “includes the force that biology defines as instinct, reproduction, the automatic activity controlled by the autonomic nervous system, subjective emotional and feeling states, and the forces that govern relationship systems” (p. 305). Kerr and Bowen (1988) describe the emotional

system as “anchored in the life process at a level probably more basic than genes,” (p. 48) and explain that the emotional system can be understood to operate within organisms at the intracellular level as well between organisms at the intrapersonal level.

Insofar as the emotional system can be compared to the respiratory system or the digestive system, the concept can be understood to describe the functional relationship between the parts of an organism that are collectively organized around the promotion of survival. Yet the emotional system is not confined by the boundaries of a single organism. Bowen (1992) articulated the interconnectedness of emotional systems by comparing them to electric circuits:

Emotional reactivity in a family or other group that lives or works together, goes from one family member to another in a chain reaction pattern. The total pattern is similar to electric circuits in which each person is ‘wired’... to all the people with whom he has relationships. Each person then becomes a nodal point or an electronic center through which impulses pass in rapid succession. (pp. 420-421)

Bowen proposed that the organization and functioning of all living things is fundamentally driven by these underlying emotional circuits, and that some primordial form of the emotional system may have existed in the very first life forms—if not before (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Significantly, while the emotional system has increased in complexity from its earliest manifestation, its essential features may have been retained. If this is the case, the emotional reactivity of human beings has far more in common with all other forms of life than we generally recognize (Bowen, 1992).

**The emotional system of the family.** When describing the emotional system of the family, Bowen (1992) used the term *emotional field* in reference to the way that people in a family are “attached to an emotional nucleus” (Kerr, 1998, p. 132) like planets in a solar system. According to Bowen the form of this gravitational attachment is such that the individuals within a family system are not truly autonomous individuals: their emotional functioning is shaped by the emotional field of the family unit, which is in turn shaped by the emotional functioning of the individual (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The intersecting social, cultural, spiritual, professional, and other relationship systems in an individual’s life contribute their own gravitational waves to that of the family, and are themselves influenced by the individuals within them.

Bowen’s concept of the emotional system of the family was a radical new way of thinking about evolution, because it described the multigenerational *emotional programming* within family systems as a form of inheritance that is as precise and predictable as genetic transmission (Kerr, 1998). Since Bowen proposed this idea, many advances have been made in neuroscience and evolutionary biology that support his theories. For example, Jablonka and Lamb (2014) have described evolution as a four-dimensional process in which genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and—in the case of humans—symbolic/cultural systems interact to preserve, transmit, and alter the biological information that passes from one generation to the next.

**Individuality and togetherness.** According to Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), the functioning of the emotional system is governed by two biologically rooted life forces or processes, *individuality* and *togetherness*, that propel an organism either to follow its own directives “to be an independent and distinct entity,” or to follow the directives of others

“to be a dependent, connected, and indistinct entity” (pp. 64-65). Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) stated that it is the interplay between these processes that governs the emotional system at its most elemental level.

***Togetherness.*** A relationship characterized primarily by togetherness is one in which the regulatory processes of the relationship system dominate the behavior of the individuals within that system. This shapes how much of an individual’s life energy is automatically bound in the relationship, and how much is therefore available to be directed toward his or her personal long-term goals (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Togetherness does not mean that the members of the system are physically together or “of one mind” in the usual sense. Rather, it describes the state of fusion in their emotional functioning.

In an emotional system governed predominantly by togetherness, the reciprocal reactivity between individual members of the system is extremely high. It is as if their central nervous systems extend beyond the limits of their own bodies and the nerve endings of each individual are fused with those of everybody else in the group. Thus, there is very little possibility for emotional separation, individuality, and autonomy. As anxiety increases, members of the system become increasingly sensitive to emotional distance. They may feel an intense need to experience a sense of closeness, belonging, and contact, or they may have an allergic repulsion and a greater need for separation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

***Individuality.*** In contrast, when a system has a high tolerance for individuality, the members of the system are less dependent on their relationships to provide a sense of wellbeing. During times of anxiety such a system may become briefly symptomatic. However, because the overall demands of the group on each member are less rigid there

is less pressure to accommodate to others, and generally more flexibility. This increases the potential adaptability of the individual members, and of the system as a whole.

Bowen (1992) referred to the individuals in such systems as having a high level of *solid self*. He explained that solid self, as opposed to *pseudo self*, remains uncompromised by the relationship system, even under stress:

The solid self is made up of clearly defined beliefs, convictions, opinions, and life principles. Each is incorporated into self, from one's own life experience, after careful intellectual reasoning and weighing the alternatives and accepting responsibility for his own choice. Each belief and principle is consistent with the others and self will take responsible actions on the principles even in situations of high anxiety. (p. 406)

**Manifestations of the emotional system: From single cells to societies.** Much like gravity, even though the emotional circuitry of individuality and togetherness is not directly perceivable, Bowen believed that it could be inferred from observations of the relationships dynamics that are driven by the workings of the emotional system (Bowen, 1992). Much of the research into Bowen theory therefore consists of examining the behaviors within and between living relationship systems—from the molecular to the global—in an attempt to further illuminate and understand the workings of the natural laws that Bowen observed and articulated in his theory.

Our lived experience is generally that our decision-making processes are grounded in reason, and that our advanced cognitive abilities make us the captains of our own ships. It is therefore challenging to appreciate the degree to which our lives are shaped from the bottom up. Damasio (2012), points out that the brain evolved “*for the benefit of all the other cells in the body*” (p. 41) to assist in the management of life. He

traces the evolution of the first eukaryotic cells, which were constituted from bacteria that “gave up their independent status to be part of a convenient new aggregate” (2012, p. 36) to the complex “societies” of cells that make up multicellular organisms, involving diverse arrangements of cooperatively organized unicellular organisms, each with their own specialized functions.

Biologist Leo Buss (2014) gives a detailed explanation of this process, which Kerr (2002d) suggests may explain how the emotional system of the mammalian family ultimately developed out of the inherent conflict between individual and group in primordial cellular life. Buss states that “the history of life is a history of different units of selection” involving “an interplay of synergisms and conflicts between different units of selection” (p. viii). He explains that when individual cells first began living in groups, none performed a specific function. However, random mutations eventually produced cells with novel features, and if those cells improved the functioning of the organism as a whole, natural selection acting at the level of the organism meant that it reproduced more successfully than other organisms (Buss, 2014).

Given this situation, Buss (2014) explains that the specialist cells were then at a reproductive disadvantage because they had less energy and apparatus to devote towards their own reproduction, potentially leaving the nondifferentiated cells in a position to thrive and wipe them out. Buss suggests that this would have been an evolutionary dead-end were it not for the development of epigenetic processes that prevented organisms being overrun by non-specialist cells that contributed nothing to the functioning of the collective. Kerr (2002d) states, “the competition between the ‘rights’ of the cell and the

‘needs’ of the group has, through natural selection, achieved a balance that preserves the integrity of the group” (p. 55).

It is unusual to think of the “rights” and “needs” of organisms at a cellular level. However, Damasio (2012) makes the case that each cell has “a decisive, unshakable determination to stay alive” (p. 37) and the ability to assign “primitive value” to things in its environment that relate, directly or indirectly, to its continued survival. He suggests that this “homeostatic intention” of cells may arise from:

“The basic physical processes that govern the interaction of molecules—for example, the forces with which two molecules attract or reject each other, or combine constructively or destructively. Molecules repulse or attract; they assemble and participate explosively, or they refuse to do so.” (p. 46)

These relationships, both within and between cells, sound remarkably like the emotional processes of individuality and togetherness that Bowen proposed play out in the relationships within and between all living organisms and collectives of organisms, including families, cultural groups, and entire nations. In fact, Damasio (2012) suggests that all of human society, including its religions, financial economies, laws, arts, sciences, and technologies, is an expression of the same survival intention of the eukaryotic cell, and that the consciousness of our highly developed minds merely reveals and expands on what was already implicit.

### **Variables of Functioning**

Bowen identified two variables that explain the range of functioning of different individuals and systems: *chronic anxiety* and differentiation of self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). He proposed that the interplay between these two variables determines the

capacity of an individual to receive and direct energy according to the individual's own values. As described above, the term "value" need not imply cognition or consciousness (Damasio, 2012). According to Bowen (1992), if the individual has a high capacity in this regard, the individual benefits from being connected to an energy system that provides a range of resources, information, and other options, whilst maintaining balance and direction according to his/her/its own values. Conversely, if the individual has low capacity in this regard, the individual has less autonomy over the direction of his/her/its own life energy, and in the relationships between the individual and other parts of the system, the individual's life energy is distorted in one or more of the following ways:

- It is bound in a physical, emotional, or social symptom.
- It is bound in a relationship triangle.
- It is bound in conflict.
- It is bound in emotional distance from part of the system.

This list describes, in general terms, the four universal relationship patterns that Bowen (1970) observed in human families, and which he believed can be observed throughout the relationship systems of other forms of life (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

**Variable I: Chronic anxiety.**

*Anxiety*. Bowen (1970) defined anxiety as the emotional response to situational stress. This response is expressed on a continuum ranging from hyperactivity to hypoactivity, and is assumed to exist in all living things (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The physiological systems involved in anxious responsiveness have evolved over time. Porges (2009) describes how the mammalian autonomic nervous system incorporates three different response systems which operate in stages. He explains that when the



environment is perceived to be safe, the body is regulated by the most recently developed system, the social communication system. This system fosters relatively calm behavioral states by inhibiting the fight-flight mechanisms of the sympathetic nervous system, reducing inflammation and dampening the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis—which is one of the main stress response pathways and which controls the release of cortisol. The operation of the social communication system thus keeps the body in a state that is optimal for growth and restoration (Porges, 2009), and facilitates engagement with the social environment (Harrison, 2014).

According to Porges (2009) the human nervous system also contains two primitive neural circuits that are activated in life-threatening situations: the *mobilization system*, which generates fight-flight behaviors, and the *immobilization system*—the oldest of the three systems—which involves responses such as feigning death and behavioral shutdown. Porges explains that the three systems are organized in a phylogenetic hierarchy, such that the newest system inhibits the older circuits as long as the environment is perceived to be safe. However, if a threat is detected and the social communication system fails to reduce that threat, the older circuits are employed in order. Porges points out that “social behavior, social communication, and visceral homeostasis are incompatible with the neurophysiological states and behaviors promoted by the two neural circuits that support defense strategies” (p. 4). Thus, activation of the mobilization and immobilization systems increases asocial responses such as withdrawal and aggression, and may be damaging if maintained for long periods (Porges, 2003).

***Chronic anxiety.*** Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) made the distinction between *acute anxiety*, which he described as a response to actual, time-limited threats, and

chronic anxiety, which he described as a response to imagined threats about what might be. Whereas acute anxiety is triggered by a specific event—such as having a baby, going through a natural disaster, or being hunted by an eagle—chronic anxiety emerges out of the emotional process of the system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen believed that chronic anxiety is intrinsic to all living things, but that it occurs to a different degree in different systems and in different contexts (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Friedman (1991) refers to chronic anxiety as “an exaggeration of a basic rhythm of life,” (p. 140) which beautifully captures the idea that anxiety is an energizing, organizing aspect of life akin to a heartbeat, and that chronic anxiety is merely an intensification of the natural survival instinct inherent to the experience of being alive.

Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) stated that when a relationship system is governed by the togetherness process, anxiety is easily triggered by the need for greater emotional contact or distance. Accordingly, the more primitive systems of the central nervous system are activated not only in response to imminent danger, but as part of an ongoing network of reactive emotional feedback loops that are independent of any specific trigger. A system that experiences a high level of chronic anxiety is comparable to an organism with a hyper-responsive immune system that, in an attempt to protect the organism, produces so much inflammation that the organism becomes impaired. Any system—be it an individual organism, a family, a workplace, or a society—consisting of a network of highly reactive relationships, has less capacity to adaptively respond to change, than a system of individuals whose emotional functioning is less reactive and more independent. As Kerr and Bowen (1988) point out, chronic anxiety,

is most accurately conceptualized as a system or process of actions and reactions that, once triggered, quickly provides its own momentum. . . . While specific events or issues are usually the principle generators of acute anxiety, the principle generators of chronic anxiety are people's reactions to a disturbance in the balance of the relationship system. (p. 113)

***Anxiety binding.*** Our ancient ancestors, the first eukaryotic cells, managed their survival with a basic set of features. They had mechanisms by which to: a) sense their interior and exterior environments, b) determine a response that was consistent with their intention to survive, and c) move accordingly (Damasio, 2012). Skipping forward in time about 3.8 million years, we can see that evolution has developed this relatively simple system to include far more advanced versions of the original design—and expanded to include life management mechanisms that span across groups of organisms—but that underlying this complexity, homeostatic life regulation remains the basic, organizing process (Damasio, 2012).

Accordingly, the level of anxiety in a system is absolutely fundamental to the functioning capacity of that system, and it determines the degree to which the life energy of the system and the individuals within it are focused on responding to a sense of threat. Bowen (1992) suggested that in a highly chronically anxious system, the responses that originally evolved to respond to immediate danger become organized around managing anxiety about the relationship process. Anxiety management thus becomes integrated into the emotional circuitry of the system, and is transmitted from one generation to the next. Every member of the system senses the anxiety of the system as a whole, but responds

and moves differently according to the functional position of the individual (Bowen, 1992).

Bowen (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) referred to the anxiety regulation attempts that characterize chronically anxious systems as *anxiety binding*. This terminology conveys the idea that rather than alleviating the anxiety—or the processes that generate it—the reactions of individual members actually lock the anxiety into the system. An example of this is provided by Arthur Zipris (A. Zipris, personal communication, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018), who makes the case that from a systems perspective, trauma—as it is usually defined—doesn't actually exist. He states that after an event such as child abuse, a person may think, "I can't form a relationship because I was abused as a child." Zipris points out that this is a linear explanation that does not reflect the systemic nature of the situation. He suggests that the difficulties being experienced by the person are less a result of the event itself, than they are a product of how the family has configured itself in response to the event and bound the anxiety in the family process.

Bowen (1970) described four basic processes by which anxiety is bound in symptoms within a nuclear family system: dysfunction in one member of the couple, distance between the couple, conflict between the couple, and transmission of parental anxiety onto a child. Bowen states that dysfunction can take physical, emotional, and behavioral forms. Thus, chronic anxiety in a system can contribute to symptoms such as diverse as cancer, depression, and shoplifting. Bowen explained that the environment in which the symptom develops determines the form it takes, such as a somatic symptom developing in a family that tends to focus on physiological explanations.

Kerr (Kerr, 1988) states that chronic anxiety can manifest in many forms, including addiction; poor physical health; overachievement and underachievement; personality traits such as indecisiveness, procrastination, and perfectionism; beliefs about the self, others, or the world at large; and over involvement with a child. Anxiety can be bound in behaviors that are socially acceptable, such as the performance of people who bind their anxiety in work, activism, athletic ambitions, or religious pursuits, and it can take the form of behaviors that are socially condemned, such as certain forms of violence.

Kerr (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) states that when anxious reactivity in a system increases, the adaptive capacities of the individuals within the system are compromised, and the system becomes even more organized by togetherness processes. Binding the anxiety involves “the integration of anxiety in a person’s life structures,” (Kerr, 1988, p. 48) which absorbs the overall level of anxiety that is being managed by the rest of the system. This requires a certain amount of the individual’s life energy, thus depleting the total amount of energy available for other things, and reducing the overall adaptiveness and flexibility both of the individual and the system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

**Variable II: Differentiation of Self.** Whereas for cells, amoebas, cockroaches, starfish, and most mammals, the processes of the emotional system play out with minimal opportunity for self-regulation, the human species has developed the capacity—within limited parameters—to make intentional choices that go far beyond the automaticity of other life forms. This is made possible by the evolution of the human nervous system and brain, and especially the expansion of the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which has led to advances in learning and memory, plasticity, responsiveness to the environment, and the increased ability to self-regulate. However, despite our ability to write operas, study

quantum physics, and question the meaning of life, our PFCs are a very recent development, and they are embedded in and programmed by the emotional systems into which we are born.

The degree to which an individual is able to self-regulate within an emotional system is explained by Bowen's concept of differentiation of self. The idea, which Bowen (1992) described as his cornerstone concept, provides a framework for understanding all the other interlocking concepts of Bowen family systems theory. Essentially, it describes the fundamental relationship between the individual and the emotional systems within which the individual is embedded, and the degree to which the individual is organized by those systems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The concept applies to two related dimensions: the level of integration of thinking and feeling, and the level of integration of the individual in the family emotional system (Frost, 2013). Paired with the concept of chronic anxiety, it explains the range of functioning of different individuals and systems.

*An evolutionary-developmental perspective.* Taking an evolutionary biologist's-eye view for a moment, it is possible to hypothesize about the process of differentiation on a much grander scale. The evolution of inorganic matter into organic matter involved the convergence of inorganic materials into the simple organic molecules that became the building blocks of living systems (Trefil, Morowitz, & Smith, 2009). Over a vast expanse of evolutionary time, molecules eventually combined to form cells, which evolved into tissue, which formed organs, which became organized into organ systems, which made up organisms, which evolved into social organisms arranged in terms of communities and societies (Piekkola, 2016). At every step along the way, the emergence of greater

complexity was made possible by the dynamic relationship between the component parts and the whole, the organization of which maintained a certain degree of separateness and individuality, and a certain amount of subordination and togetherness. It is as if the mixture of tension and harmony yielded by this continuous, emergent relationship was generating the music of the universe, evolution itself (C. Burnett, personal communication, August 3, 2015).

However, when Bowen used the term differentiation, which he borrowed from biology, he was referring specifically to the process of differentiation as it currently exists in the interactions between human beings—although there are variations in the degree to which the functioning of the individual is governed by the unit in other life forms, such as harvester ants, which may reveal the ancient, biological roots of differentiation that we see operating at a more complex level in our own species (Howard, 2014). During his research at NIMH, Bowen had observed that the capacity to self-regulate in the context of important relationships seemed to be determined by a wide range of factors, including the biological and genetic makeup of the individual, gender and sibling position, the level of differentiation of the parents, the emotional climate in the family of origin before and after the person's birth, and the life stressors present in the family throughout the individual's development (Bowen, 1992).

As a natural course of events, a child starts life in a state of symbiosis with the family, and gradually develops more autonomy over the course of childhood and adolescence. During this period, the child develops physiological and psychological patterns of emotional functioning that are embedded in the regulatory mechanisms of the family system (Friesen, 2014). This includes the shaping of the child's autonomic

nervous system, which is shaped by stress levels in the family during pregnancy and childhood (Bush et al., 2017; Rash et al., 2016).

Bowen (1992) found that the degree to which an individual is able to self-regulate, rather than being automatically responsive to the family system, is generally set by the time people reach young adulthood. He observed that the shaping influence of the family's multigenerational emotional system is so strong, that the level of differentiation for each individual is only slightly above or below the rest of the system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen (1992) believed that when an individual develops relationships with people outside the family system, those relationships are wired into the emotional circuitry of the family, and thus become extensions of the emotional processes of the original family.

***Differentiation between the intellectual system and the emotional system.***

Bowen (1992) believed that people's capacity to self-regulate depended, in part, on the degree to which their intellectual systems were overridden by emotional reactivity:

At the fusion end of the spectrum, the intellect is so flooded by emotionality that the total life course is determined by the emotional process and what 'feels right,' rather than beliefs or opinions. The intellect exists as an appendage of the feeling system. It may function reasonably well in. . . impersonal areas, but on personal subjects its functioning is controlled by the emotions. (p. 363)

This emphasis on the role of emotion in severely impaired individuals has led to Bowen being criticized for privileging rationality over feelings (Leupnitz, 1988). However, Bowen theory rests on the premise that the intrapersonal emotional system—in synchronization with the interpersonal emotional system—generally overrides the intellectual system in response to stress, thus reducing the cognitive resources available



and limiting the person's capacity to act in accordance with his or her principles and values in the service of long-term goals (Bowen, 1992).

Bowen's conceptualization of the dual systems of the brain, including the basic emotional circuitry of the subcortical regions and the regulatory cognitive system of the PFC, is consistent with emerging research into neural functioning (Papero, 2014). Specifically, Bowen's proposition about the dominance of the emotional system over the cognitive system in response to anxiety, is borne out by research into the relationship between the PFC and the automatic regulatory systems of the brain. Findings by Raio, Orederu, Palazzolo, Shurick, and Phelps (2013) suggest that stress markedly impairs the cognitive regulation of emotion, limiting our capacity to exert control over our thoughts and behavior. Noone (2016) describes the findings of many neuroscientists who are studying the mechanisms by which subcortical emotional circuits become more influential than the PFC under stressful conditions. For example, stressors can temporarily impair the functioning of a part of the PFC related to working memory (2016); repeated stress restricts parts of the medial PFC but generates growth in the amygdala (Arnsten, Wang, & Paspalas, 2012; Gamo et al., 2015); and higher cognitive functions that are critical in the regulation of automatic affective reactions, such as attention, cognitive flexibility, and motivation, are compromised by exposure to stress (Gamo et al., 2015; McEwen, 2007).

Bowen (1992) observed that people vary in the degree to which they are governed by the emotional system, and therefore in their level of differentiation. He (1992) theorized that there is a spectrum ranging from people whose capacity to think is completely fused with their emotions, in which case feeling governs over thinking, to

people whose thinking is relatively unimpeded by emotional reactivity to others, in which case, “the more they have the ability to access relevant information provided *both* [italics added] by feelings and by intellect” (Frost, 2013, p. 49). Bowen (1992) referred to this as “the level of integration of self in a person” (p. 407), and proposed that those who could differentiate between the responses of the intellectual system and the emotional system have the greatest potential for engaging freely in personal relationships.

***Differentiation between the individual and the family emotional system.*** Kerr (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) points out that “associated with the capacity to distinguish between feelings and thoughts is the ability to *choose* between having one’s functioning guided by feelings or by thoughts” (p. 97). Thus, awareness and observation of the emotional process is a step towards operating beyond instinctual automaticity and making choices that are based on the principled, long-term goals of the individual. Bowen observed that under calm conditions this is much easier than when anxiety is high and the system as a whole becomes more organized by togetherness (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The degree to which an individual is able to chart his or her own course within the stormy climate of an emotional system is determined by both the level of anxiety and the degree to which the individual can “participate freely in the emotional sphere without the fear of becoming too fused with others” (Bowen, 1992, p. 364).

Bowen (1992) points out that it is possible for people to participate more fully in emotional events when they are able to access logical reasoning to respond thoughtfully. He contrasts this with the state of emotional imprisonment that occurs when a person’s principles, knowledge, and beliefs are formed in response to pressure from within an emotional unit. He proposed that under such conditions people tend to be driven far more

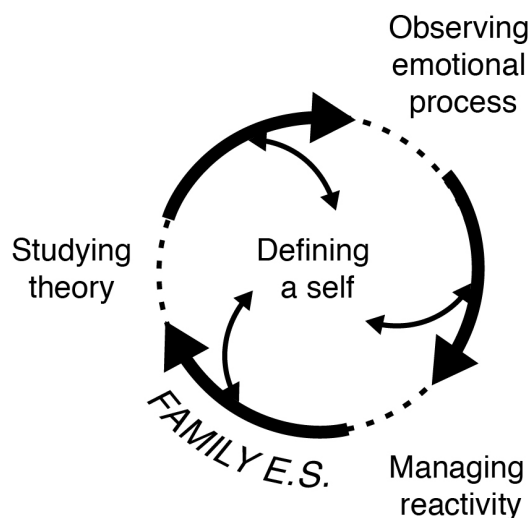
by reactivity to the emotional processes in their relationships than by thoughtful intentions. When anxiety is high, this reactivity might emerge as an intense need for closeness or as a highly allergic need for isolation, representing the two ends of the spectrum of togetherness. In either case, the individual has less freedom than if they can tolerate the pressures of the emotional unit without automatically conforming or escaping.

Another way of understanding differentiation is therefore to think of it in terms of the way individuals and systems manage the balance of togetherness and individuality (Kerr, 2002a). Again, Bowen's emphasis on the value of increasing individuality is not based on the belief that individuality is preferable to togetherness, but that it is much harder to maintain. He stated, "there is never a threat for too much individuality. The human need for togetherness prevents going beyond a certain point" (Bowen, 1992, p. 279). When describing the balance of togetherness and individuality, he stated, "optimum functioning would be somewhere near a fifty-fifty balance, with neither force overriding the other and the system sufficiently flexible to adapt to change" (1992, p. 277).

***Defining a self.*** An understanding of the relationship between the intellectual and emotional systems, the relentless gravitational pull toward togetherness, and an appreciation for the flexibility that is lost when people's functioning and sense of wellbeing are dominated by their relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) underlies the impetus to increase one's level of differentiation. However, working on this goal requires the individual to make a very thoughtful, sustained effort in the face of tremendous pressures to revert back to habitual behaviors (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Developing emotional neutrality is not easy, not least because it involves tolerating the feelings of

anxiety that would ordinarily be managed by engaging in deeply ingrained and familiar behaviors.

In the author's experience there is a reciprocal process between a) studying the theory, b) observing the emotional processes operating in one's own life, and c) learning to regulate one's own anxiety without distancing, cutoff, triangulation, or reciprocal over/underfunctioning, that gradually creates the conditions for defining a self within one's family emotional system (see Figure 1). Studying theory includes some combination of reading Bowen's own work or watching videos of his presentations and interviews; reading the work of other scholars who study his theory; and attending classes, presentations, and trainings focused on Bowen family systems theory. Observing the emotional process in one's own life involves identifying the emotional processes operating within one's own relationships and becoming more aware of the part that one plays in those processes (Bowen, 1992).



*Figure 1:* The process of using Bowen theory to define a self in one's family emotional system. Figure 1 was created by the author. Copyright in progress.

Managing one's reactivity more thoughtfully happens partly as a byproduct of the effort to observe—which in itself can engender more objectivity and neutrality about the behavior of other people—and partly in the active attempt to engage differently in one's relationships based on one's understanding. Bowen (1992) stated that becoming a better observer of the family system and controlling one's emotional reactivity are interlinked because “the effort to become a better observer and learn more about the family reduces reactivity, and this in turn makes one become a better observer” (p. 541).

As Comella (2006) points out, students of Bowen are always working with their own versions of his theory, and each person's frame of reference automatically reflects the limitations in the observer's thinking related to her level of differentiation. She writes:

An essential component of improvement in observational capacity necessarily involves the observer's focusing on his own functioning in the relationship systems he is observing and taking remedial action to increase his capacity for accurate self-observation, without which his observations and their interpretations would always be distorted by some degree of fusion of emotional and intellectual functioning. (p. 138)

Thus, although the process of studying, observing, and attempting to manage one's own reactivity lays the groundwork for defining a self in relation to one's family, the effort is always a work in progress. There seems to be a limit to the extent to which it is possible to grasp the theory without actually experiencing the increased ability to define a self.

Furthermore, one's ability to observe and make decisions informed by these observations is limited by the bounds of one's understanding. Bowen stated, “observation is not possible until one can control one's actions sufficiently to be able to observe. The process

of observation allows for more control, which in turn, in a series of small steps, allows for better observation” (1992, p. 480). Thus, the entire process requires a continued effort that cycles between studying theory, observing the emotional process in one’s own relationships, and making active efforts based on those observations.

### **The Role of the Therapist**

At the Evolution of Psychotherapy conference in 1985, Bowen suggested that the earliest origins of psychotherapy could be traced back to the instincts of egg-laying reptilian mothers trying to protect their young<sup>1</sup> (Kerr, 2002f). He noted that with the evolution of social mammals, the provision of protection gradually extended beyond the relationship of mother and offspring until, with the emergence of Homo Sapiens, new social roles developed that were filled by individuals who provided guidance, support, and knowledge to members of the clan. According to Bowen, these roles further developed into professional specializations such as teachers, ministers, and physicians, and eventually produced the role of the psychotherapist.

### **The Objective**

Throughout his career, Bowen (1992) criticized the approach of other psychotherapy approaches for being separated from theory and for presuming that the therapeutic relationship is the essential mode of treatment for most problems. He suggested that an anxious family system could be temporarily soothed by their connection to a psychotherapist: “It is as though the therapeutic relationship drains the tension from the family and the family can appear to be different” (Bowen, 1992, p. 342). However, he believed that actual lasting change came from an increase in the basic level

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<sup>1</sup> Which is why many therapists today have sliding scales.

of differentiation of one or more family members (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Thus, the overall goal of therapy based on Bowen family systems theory “is to help individual members rise up out of the emotional togetherness that binds us all,” and to “help the motivated member to take a microscopic step toward a better level of differentiation” (Bowen, 1992, p. 371).

### **The Approach**

Bowen (1992) states, “therapy based on differentiation is no longer therapy in the usual sense” (p. 371). He suggested that conventional therapy is oriented to resolving conflict in the short term, but that this can reduce the opportunity for an individual to work on defining a self in the face of the family togetherness. Instead, he espoused an approach to working with families that he termed “coaching” rather than therapy. In this capacity the therapist works to maintain his or her own differentiation in relation to the client by attempting to remain in emotional contact but outside the emotional field of the family (Bowen, 1992).

Rather like the contagious spread of anxiety in a relationship, the differentiated stance of the therapist can stimulate similar efforts in the client (Kerr, 2002e). However, Bowen believed in keeping the emphasis on the client’s emotional investment in his or her relationships outside of therapy, and making a goal of therapy “to help the other person make a research project out of life” (Bowen, 1992, p. 179). Thus, a therapist informed by Bowen family systems theory expects the most important work to take place outside the therapy session. Papero (2002) states, “the learning takes place in each family member’s efforts to become familiar with the emotional system of family, work, and community and to manage self differently within it” (p. 124), and he emphasizes that this

effort is about the client taking on responsibility for self. In this way, the therapist gets “into contact with family resourcefulness and strength” (Bowen, 1992, p. 177).

Bowen believed that therapists deal with the same challenges in their own families that their clients face in theirs’ and that every therapist “has a responsibility to define himself in his own family if he is to function adequately in his professional work” (Bowen, 1992, p. 468). He thought that otherwise, therapists easily become anxious about the family, feel responsible for solving the family’s problems, and become triangulated into anxious relationships with different family members (Bowen, 1992). In contrast, Bowen (1992) described his own continuing effort to stay outside the emotional process of the family by “making the family members responsible for each other, avoiding the family tendency to assign importance to [him], and promising no benefits except the family’s own effort to learn about itself and change itself” (p. 375). He stated, “most important was a long-term effort to attain and maintain emotional neutrality with individual family members.”

A powerful example of this approach is found in the work of Walter Smith, a long time student of Bowen family systems theory who spent many years as the clinical director for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services and the deputy director for the department's Office of Children, Youth and Families. In this capacity he oversaw service provision to more than 20,000 people residing in Allegheny County with concerns related to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect (The Pittsburgh Foundation, 2018). At a Bowen family systems conference in March 2018, Smith explained that a clinician’s anxious response to abuse can elevate anxiety in the system, whereas a neutral response can make a positive difference (W. H. Smith,



personal communication, March 3, 2018) He stated that it takes years to learn not to take sides when working with families in which there is abuse, and emphasized the importance of allowing people to self-correct in response to information, rather than trying to lead them in the direction of change. Smith described clinical neutrality as an active stance in which the clinician strives to give up his own agenda for his clients to change. He explained that to manage his own functioning as the leader in such a large, anxiety-driven system required hours of meditation every day.

### **Defining the Self of the Therapist**

Bowen recognized that it takes great determination and effort to maintain a differentiated stance in the context of a therapeutic relationship, and warned that “it is easy for the family to wrap itself around the therapist emotionally,” and to place the therapist in the responsible position (Bowen, 1992, p. 375). He stated that one of the most important practices for the therapist is therefore to continually define a self in to the family (1992). Bowen found that of all his trainees, there was one group in particular who did unusually well in this respect. They had “unusual skill and flexibility as family psychotherapists,” they were “adept at avoiding intense emotional entanglements with families,” and they “could work comfortably with upset and distraught families” (Bowen, 1992, p. 519). These were the trainees who, on their own initiative, began trying to apply what they were learning from Bowen about family systems in their own families of origin (Bowen, 1992).

Bowen himself had set a precedent for doing such family work in the efforts he made to define a self with his own family, a nodal moment of which he presented at the

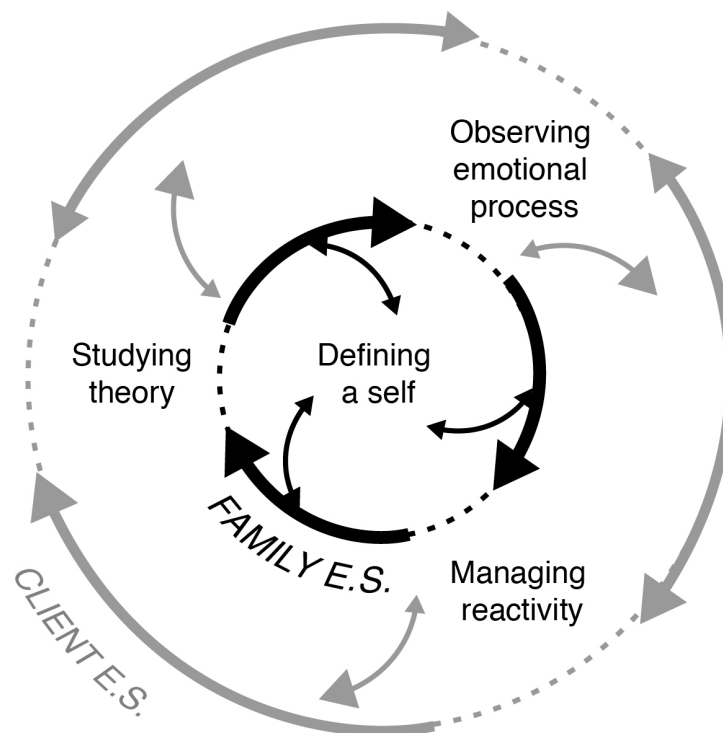
Family Research Conference in 1967 (Bowen, 1992). When explaining the theoretical premise for this effort, Bowen (1992) stated:

Reactivity operates in a chain reaction. . . . The therapeutic system is based on being able to observe accurately to see the part that self plays, and to consciously control this programmed emotional reactivity. . . . The process of being able to observe is the slow beginning to moving one small step toward getting one's self 'outside' an emotional system. (p. 480)

This attempt to observe and manage emotional reactivity in relation to a client's family emotional system is directly linked to the therapist's ability to do this with her own family. Kerr (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) states:

Differentiation of self in one's family of origin enhances a therapist's ability to monitor the effect of his own emotional functioning on his clinical work. . . . Therapists have a unique responsibility to continually work on differentiation because a therapist's gains in his own family are reflected in the progress of his clinical families. (p. 286)

Thus, the process of study, observation, and management of reactivity in one's own family is intrinsically connected to an equivalent process in a therapist's relationships with his or her clients (see Figure 2). The process of defining a self in relation to one's clients—and other emotional systems outside one's family—can certainly influence the efforts in one's own family. However, as Eileen Gottlieb, a scholar of Bowen theory who was coached by Murray Bowen for many years, often says, “there is no substitute for doing the work done in one's own family” (E. Gottlieb, personal communication, February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018).



*Figure 2:* The process of using Bowen theory to define a self with a client’s family emotional system. The weight of the arrows indicates the relative influence of defining a self in each system. Figure 2 was created by the author. Copyright in progress.

Bowen believed that when the anxiety in a family system goes down, people can better explain and come up with ways of managing their problems than the mental health professionals that they are in contact with, and that a therapist “isn’t going to fix anything except themselves” (Bowen, 1979). Accordingly, a clinician informed by Bowen family systems theory aims to be useful to a family by seeking to understand the family and to think for himself. Kerr and Bowen (1988) state:

One of the most constructive attitudes a therapist can have. . . is to regard the family as a tremendous resource. . . . If a therapist can ask questions that do not

express an opinion or assume an answer, then he can learn about the family and in the process the family can learn about itself. (pp. 292-293)

He explains that when a therapist responds anxiously to a family she may feel responsible for the family and try to “fix” it. Conversely, she may become anxiously distant and feel no responsibility toward the family to help them see their options. Thus, the efforts of the therapist are directed at managing her own functioning, not her clients’. In the words of Kathleen Wiseman, speaking at a Bowen family systems theory conference in October 2014 about her role as a consultant: “I am the client” (K. Wiseman, personal communication, October 11, 2014).

### **Becoming the Client: A Playful Process**

This way of thinking about the world, about human beings, about families, about self, and about therapy is very different to what many trainee clinicians have previously encountered. A particular challenge can be recognizing the level of differentiation of one’s own family system, recognizing the extent to which one’s own behavior is driven automatically as part of an anxious response to the togetherness process, and recognizing the degree of reciprocal functioning between oneself and one’s family members. In the author’s own process of defining a self, she has experienced peaks and troughs of anxious reactivity, creating a spiraling waveform as she cycles through the stages of study, observation, and self-management.

Throughout this process, questions and ideas about the role of playfulness have continued to surface in different forms. Looking back from her current vantage point, it is possible to see that playfulness has been an integral part of her emotional process as a student, clinician, and family member. At times her playfulness has functioned as a form

of togetherness and at other times as a form of individuality. She has used playfulness in moments of overfunctioning for others and at times as a way of avoiding responsibility. However, she has also been playful in the development of one-to-one, person-to-person relationships. Her capacity to be playful has sometimes been impaired by emotional reactivity, but at other times her increased ability to define a self seems to have opened up new possibilities for playful interaction. In both her personal life and her clinical work she continues to struggle to strike the balance described by Bowen (1992) at the beginning of this chapter: a point between seriousness and humor, where [the therapist] can shift either way to facilitate the process in the family” (p. 229). The following narrative describes the development of the author’s thinking about playfulness through the lens of Bowen family systems theory prior to undertaking this research, which eventually led to the questions that were addressed in this study. This narrative is related in the first-person in order to make this personal account clearer to read.

### **Author’s Narrative**

#### **Before Bowen**

**Theory.** My initial exposure to Bowen Theory was nothing short of emotionally devastating. It completely undermined two beliefs that were central to my self-concept: my understanding of human functioning, and my professional identity as a therapist. First, I thought of people as fundamentally separate entities from their families of origin. Although I was developing a systemic orientation and understood that behavior is shaped by context, I assumed that one context could be as influential as another and that people could grow up and away from their families to operate independently of their family systems. Second, I believed that every human interaction held the potential to profoundly

and permanently change a person's entire life, regardless of what had come before, through a shift in perspective.

These beliefs allowed me to think of myself as separate from my family. I loved my parents but I saw the unhappiness in their lives and from a young age I had organized myself around the idea of doing things differently than them. The way I looked at it, I had built an escape pod and broken free of the orbit of my home planet—I was far away and free of the gravitational waves that I had feared would hold me down. The way I behaved when making radio contact or taking a brief trip back to visit was, I believed, simply a reflection of the crazy-making electromagnetic field back home. Anyone, I imagined, would have a hard time handling herself like an adult in those conditions. When I was introduced to Bowen family systems theory, I found the notion that I was still a fully integrated member of my family system very threatening. If my spacecraft's operating system was somehow still intrinsically networked with those of my parents, it didn't matter how far I flew away from them. Surely it meant that I was destined to land on a planet with those same gravitational waves, and that I hadn't escaped at all.

The second belief was tied to the first, in that it explained the means by which I thought people could reinvent themselves. It was an orientation that saw the current context as a primary, fluid field of action in relation. Conversely, I thought of the past as concluded, and therefore relatively impotent in contrast to the endlessly emerging present. If the past was a planet that I wished to leave behind me, then all I needed to do was continue reprogramming the software of my spacecraft. Similarly, I thought I could help clients do the same. I believed that in a single session my clients and I could recode a program to alter the course of their trajectories, sending them soaring off into another

solar system free of the gravitational waves of the past. The fact that all my clients seemed to be stuck in their orbits, rotating around and around in variations of the same cosmic waltz, was—I wholeheartedly believed—due to my own inadequacy as a clinician. I assumed that I simply wasn't a very good therapist yet. I just needed to try harder. Every session presented me with a new opportunity to make a difference, to find the right way of saying the right thing that would help my clients to think, feel, do, and be different.

**Practice.** At the beginning of the doctoral program I was assigned a client, Rachel, who was a transfer from another therapist. I saw her in the context of a live supervision group that met weekly. Each student in turn would see his or her client behind a one-way mirror while the supervisor and the other students sat in an adjoining room to watch and discuss the case. In my initial meeting with Rachel I was eager to demonstrate my clinical skills to my supervisor. My training thus far had been rooted in the ontology of cybernetics and social constructionism, with an emphasis on generating immediate shifts in perspective or behavior to quickly resolve clients' presenting problems.

In accordance with this approach, I looked for an opportunity to begin developing therapeutic maneuverability and focusing on relevant information about the problem (Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982). I was therefore confounded when, several minutes into the session, I found that I was unable to get a word in edgeways. Rachel spoke a mile a minute about her many relationship losses, the friends she had driven away, her anger towards her husband, and her inability to "move on" with her life. The conversation was like sitting at a railroad crossing watching a train barrel past at high speed, each carriage

weighted down with complaints, completely impervious to the observing pedestrians. She never paused or left an opening for me to interject. In fact, when I tried to interrupt she simply talked over me, amplifying her voice to drown mine out. I felt completely debilitated.

I spent the rest of the semester endeavoring to create space for my ideas in the session, and I gradually became sure that Rachel was responding. I felt that I was getting through to her, and that she was beginning to see things differently. Not only had our sessions taken on a new rhythm, she seemed to feel better about herself. By the time I entered my next supervision practicum three months later, I was sure that she would soon be ready to terminate therapy. Even though Rachel continued to talk about the same issues of grief, anger, and a desire to find her path, I believed that we had made significant progress in the way that she was now thinking about these issues. I explained this to my new supervisor, Dr. Chris Burnett, who did not share my assumptions. He questioned whether this client was even interested in change, and challenged me to consider what she might actually be getting from therapy, despite what she said her goals were. I adamantly disagreed, and for several weeks I strove to make progress.

Finally, one of the other students suggested that we watch a recording of Rachel with her previous therapist. I was very much in favor, thinking it would demonstrate how much she had changed as a result of the work we had done. The experience turned out to be one of the most important, humbling, and eye-opening learning experiences of my early training. After only a few minutes of watching the video, it was apparent that Rachel was saying the same things, in the same way—often word-for-word—that she had been saying six months earlier. I was genuinely shocked. I had become personally



invested in Rachel having a shift in perspective, which I was measuring based on what she said. Now I saw that, by that measure, nothing had changed. I later realized that the changes I had seen in the form of our conversations, could reasonably be put down to Rachel's anxiety lowering as she got to know me. What I had mistaken for a basic change in her overall wellbeing was more likely an indication of the localized stress levels she was experiencing in therapy.

It seemed that her former therapist and I were interchangeable, and that just about anyone could have been sitting in that chair as long as they were willing to listen. I realized that nothing I had said or done in sessions had actually made a significant difference in Rachel's life—not in terms of the outcomes I valued at the time— and I took this as a cue to work harder and take even more responsibility for what happened in sessions. If I was going to help Rachel reprogram her escape pod and get out of this interminable orbit, it was obviously going to take an engineering feat of some brilliance that I had not yet managed. Consequently, when Dr. Burnett invited me to “sit on my hands” more in sessions, I was both aghast and extremely resistant.

### **Introduction to Bowen**

**A different kind of supervision.** Dr. Burnett was the first person to introduce me to ideas that were rooted in Bowen family systems theory. The ideas that he presented completely contradicted my beliefs about individuality and change, and my first response was to argue against them. I thought that he was completely wrong and every week I endeavored to prove it. For me, the disagreement went far beyond an intellectual difference of opinion. I felt confronted by ideas that threatened my sense of wellbeing and purpose in the world. Furthermore, I felt that Dr. Burnett was asking me to do

something unethical. I already believed that I was failing Rachel, and he was asking me to do less. I felt like I was in a race against the clock to find the right key to unlock the door to a solution that might save her life, and he was suggesting that I slow down. Every week when I left the group I fled to my car and burst into tears, swearing that if Dr. Burnett were right about what he thought, then I would quit being a therapist because there seemed to be no point. I felt at the time as if his ideas threatened to extinguish much of the magic, possibility, and hope from the world.

Being in supervision with Dr. Burnett was also difficult for another reason. I found myself in a very unfamiliar and uncomfortable position. Up until that point in my life I had responded to strong, intelligent people with a fairly narrow range of strategies. My favorite option was to perform my own intelligence, creativity, and originality to that person to achieve a position of specialness and high regard. This was never an entirely secure position because it relied on the strength of my latest performance, so I had to continually reassure myself by repeatedly performing. If I had a bad show, I could be depressed and anxious until the next opportunity to shine, and I put a great deal of life energy into managing these dynamics.

When I encountered Dr. Burnett for the first time, my initial strategy was the ubiquitous academic mating dance. I strutted my intelligence, knowledge, and scholarliness with my usual gusto, but it was not met with the customary applause and gold stars. This was disturbing, and made worse by the fact that Dr. Burnett was constantly saying things that undermined the theoretical underpinnings of both my personal and professional life. It sent me into internal paroxysms of confusion, self-

criticism, and hopelessness. I swung between angrily blaming him for my distress, and desperately wanting him to like me.

Mid-way through the semester I had reached the point where “dislike” seemed the only explanation for Dr. Burnett’s manner toward me. I had never experienced anything quite like it. In retrospect, I realized that what I was interpreting as aversion was my own reactivity to Dr. Burnett not taking on responsibility for my discomfort. Everybody in the room knew how ill at ease I was, and yet he didn’t appear to be doing anything to try to make me feel better. It was a completely alien experience. In my own life, other people’s discomfort automatically compelled me to action: to comfort, accommodate, enable, encourage, and appreciate. In the absence of these behaviors I came to my own conclusions.

Of course, there was plenty of rational evidence to suggest that dislike was not the most logical explanation for Dr. Burnett’s manner. My primary evidence for this was the way that he laughed, heartily and genuinely, whenever I managed to make a joke. Finally, I made an appointment to see him privately and explain my concern that he was annoyed by me. I like to think that this effort was reflective of the fact that despite my great emotional neediness, I had summoned the capacity to act with some thoughtfulness. The conversation helped me to shift out of my anxious tailspin and to start reacting more to the reality of the situation than what I feared it meant about me. I was still jumpy, desperate to please, and flooded with guilt about my failures as a clinician, but I had calmed down a lot, which made it possible for me to hear things differently.

**A Bowen family systems perspective: Reflection I.** In general, my behavior throughout this narrative can be understood in terms of my developing effort to manage

my own reactivity in the emotional systems of my family, training environment, and clients. My initial encounter with Bowen family systems theory immediately began to disrupt my sense of security at the same time as it challenged the ways in which I had habitually bound my anxiety. In Bowen's language, I was operating at the level of *pseudo-self*, a part of the self that is determined by the relationship system and therefore extremely susceptible to the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of others (Bowen, 1992). When confronted with ideas that destabilized my sense of self, suspended precariously as it was in a rickety scaffolding of affirmation, my reactivity to the emotional process intensified. I triangulated many people by telling them about my experiences with Dr. Burnett and I reacted to him with hostility and blamed him for my discomfort.

The high level of anxiety I experienced in response to this experience is indicative of the low level of differentiation in my family system. Furthermore, the calming influence of Dr. Burnett's laughter can be seen as a reflection of the degree of fusion that I experience with people whose approval I seek—a relational pattern that I likely developed in relationship to my father. In recent years I have observed the automaticity with which I become tense or relaxed in response to micro-signals about his mood. For example, I am generally very reactive to signs that he is distressed, but I can calm down in a fraction of a second in response to him making a joke—a sure sign that he is relaxed in that moment. Thus, in this supervisory context, playfulness served to bring down my anxiety enough that I could be more reflective and find a more adaptive way of handling the situation. It is probably true to say that throughout the practicum I was focused on trying to manage the experience in a way that fit with my beliefs and values, but not until I calmed down was I really able to do so.

**Individuality and togetherness.** Not long after this conversation, Dr. Burnett introduced me to an idea that fundamentally changed the way I thought about my life. He described a quality of human relationships that I had never really considered, but which seemed incontrovertibly true. He pointed out that two people in a significant relationship could never maintain a fixed, enduring state wherein the needs of both people are perfectly balanced. He said that this discrepancy between the needs of the individual and the demands of the relationship generates an inherent tension in all relationships. His comments, of course, referred to Bowen's concepts of individuality and togetherness.

I found the concept particularly compelling because I could think of no exception—it seemed to be an elegantly simple universal principle that I could see playing out in limitless variations both in my own relationships and in those I observed. The obvious conclusion was that there was no perfect state of being to which any of us might aspire, because this tension was inherent in the very fabric of every relationship. Somehow, as I embraced this concept and simultaneously abandoned the notion of a perfectly balanced, fairy tale union, I felt relief. It was the beginning of a response that, through further study and application of Bowen's ideas, would later mature in to a deep appreciation for life in all its forms.

At the time I asked, "Does that make therapy a form of love?" It had suddenly struck me that if everybody goes through life being pulled on by the demands of other people, never truly free of the emotionally warping expectations of family, friends, co-workers, and society, then the role of the therapist is utterly unique. Perhaps therapists could offer the truly unconditional regard that was ultimately impossible with other people. The professional boundaries of the relationship, the clearly delimited time

constraints, and the therapist's training to manage counter transference, all created conditions in which a therapist could genuinely experience their clients with no investment in them being one particular way or another. At the time this seemed very beautiful to me, and it was an idea that strongly influenced my clinical path for a couple years, until I eventually figured out how limiting it was.

**A Bowen family systems perspective: Reflection II.** Comella (2006) points out that the observer's version of Bowen family systems theory "automatically incorporates the undifferentiation in the observer" (p. 138). At the time, my understanding of the concept of individuality and togetherness was distorted by my tendency to accommodate other people's needs. I had learned the skill of putting others at ease as a way of reducing my own anxiety about relationships. This had developed into many skills that are generally well regarded in therapists—empathy, curiosity, patience, active listening, and so on—which I thought of as inherently positive, compassionate traits. Once I recognized that these behaviors could also be part of an automatic emotional process, I was able to be more thoughtful and selective about the how to balance my own needs for individuality and togetherness with those of other people.

**A thoughtful response.** After the final supervision session of the semester, myself and two other students sat and talked for two hours, trying to process the experience of the last few months with Dr. Burnett. One of the things I reflected on was the fact that I had initially felt jealous of one of these students. Dr. Burnett had seemed particularly energized by her, and a great deal of our discussion time was spent on her process. I had longed for the same attention and initially judged this seemingly

unbalanced interaction as unfair. However, by the end of the semester I recognized that I had been present for a truly great learning opportunity.

The student in question had just started reading Bowen and she was wrestling with the ideas. She spoke openly and brilliantly about her struggle, using extensive examples from her personal and professional life to explore Bowen's concepts. Dr. Burnett was constantly bringing new ideas to the table, challenging her, and clearly enlivened by the intellectual exercise. By the end of the semester I had gradually come to see the richness of these conversations and to recognize that they were all the richer for the time they took. Complaining to myself that it "wasn't fair" that we weren't talking equally about every student, was akin to watching Hamlet and being upset that the other characters didn't have equal lines. I thanked this student for the privilege of witnessing her process, and surprised myself with the realization that I really was grateful. Although I had felt uncomfortable to be out of the spotlight, it had actually been a remarkable place to be and I had gained a lot from doing something different, even though it had been painful.

Although by this point I had calmed down enough to appreciate some of the unique experiences offered by Dr. Burnett's style of supervision, I left the semester feeling relieved to be away from his strange way of looking at the world and I couldn't wait to resume training with professors who I hoped could help me to become a good enough therapist to engage with my clients in ways that would generate change. However, much to my surprise, as the weeks went on I found that I could no longer see the world in the way I had before. My understanding of people had shifted, along with my expectations of therapy. I soon started with a new supervisor and team, but I felt that

they were unrealistically expectant based on the details of what Rachel said in sessions. Despite her own description of her goals for therapy, I was beginning to suspect that our meetings largely served the function of a pressure valve—a weekly release of built-up steam that provided some relief and made the next few days more tolerable for her. Furthermore, I was the only person in her life who willingly sat and listened to her and perhaps for Rachel, being listened to was no small thing.

### **The Playful Emotional Triangle**

It is my experience that whenever I get a taste for a food or drink that I once disliked, it eventually becomes a favorite and I cannot get enough of it. This was true of olives, pickles, IPAs, blue cheese, and it soon became true of Bowen family systems theory. Eight months after my initial tempestuous exposure to Bowen's ideas I started reading Kerr and Bowen's *Family Evaluation* (1988) and found myself completely fascinated. As luck would have it I began reading at the point that my family entered into a crisis, and I made it through the first few chapters during my flight home to England.

Once I was reading Bowen for myself I had the experience that I have subsequently heard many other people relate: to my astonishment, Bowen's descriptions of relationship systems precisely articulated and explained the dynamics that I saw myself participating in with my own family. It was unnerving that his observations were so accurate, and fascinating to learn that the peculiar, infuriating quirks of my own family could be explained as expressions of universal life processes. It was as if he'd been a fly on the wall of my living room and was now calmly making sense of the madness. During my visit I spent each day with my parents trying my best to negotiate the intense emotional process, and every evening I continued reading, astounded and strangely



relieved by the degree to which Bowen's concepts explained what I was living through. My whole experience with Bowen's ideas thus far was consistent with Kerr's observation that "paradoxically, many people anxiously resist accepting such a deep level of human interdependence, yet people seem less anxious when they begin to comprehend it" (2002b, p. 89).

**The playful supervisor.** Having accused Dr. Burnett of infiltrating my brain, I signed up for another semester of supervision with him. This time, the group met weekly to discuss cases that we were seeing independently in the university clinic. At these meetings, Dr. Burnett made it clear that it was entirely up to the group what we talked about, and although the conversations included clinical cases, they also ranged through science, art, current events, movies, philosophy, food, sport, celebrities, politics, technology, and our own families. Dr. Burnett allowed the conversation to wander at its own pace and in any direction, but always invited us to think about the topic of conversation through a natural systems lens. It was truly an exhilarating experience, and one of the most enjoyable and fulfilling social experiences I had ever had. We were frequently incapacitated by bouts of the kind of laughter that make it hard to breath, but just as often the conversation peaked in moments of profound, awe-struck wonder, like the moment a ridge is crested after a long hike, and you find yourself looking out across a vast, wild landscape, buzzing with the transcendent feeling of bearing witness to something so much bigger than oneself.

During this time, the tone of my clinical work began to shift. I felt somewhat released from the anxiety of expecting—and feeling responsible for—symptom relief. At the very least I was beginning to observe my own anxiety and make efforts to be less

driven by it, and in doing so I found a new delight in conducting therapy sessions. My expectations of my role had shifted from being an action-oriented agent of change to being a guest in my client's lives, invited for a time to accompany them and have the great privilege of learning about them and their families. The real treasure of this experience was discovering the countless unique ways in which the universe was unfolding, governed by a set of relational dynamics that could be seen in every living system whether it was an ant colony, a trap house, an orchestra, a government, or a family.

I didn't initially make the connection between the form of Dr. Burnett's supervision and the theory that informed it, but I could see how it was influencing my clinical work. For a start, having embraced the notion of therapy as a form of unconditional love, I was rejoicing in the opportunity to offer what I saw as a genuinely open, respectful, appreciative, non-judgmental stance, with as little investment as I could manage in my client's lives changing in any particular way. This was grounded in a statement made by Michael Kerr: "Nature is neutral. There is no right and wrong, good and bad. Nature is simply a process of interrelated events. But the feeling system and human subjectivity take sides in nature and impose on it what it should be" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 32).

I thought about this concept all the time and it felt like I was having a spiritual awakening. Approaching the world with a posture of complete acceptance was incredibly liberating, but it was also confusing, because it challenged my feelings and thoughts about animal cruelty, rape, social injustice, and other forms of suffering that I abhorred. Later I found a way to hold a clearer position about this seeming contradiction, but for

now I did my best to stretch the “nature is neutral” thinking as far as I could, at one point giving a presentation in which I made the case that Mother Theresa and Adolf Hitler were really two sides of the same anxious coin. Thus, I came to appreciate that all the greatest horrors of life can be seen as extreme expressions of the same organizing forces that govern my own behavior, and out of which evolved kissing, holiday parties, and the space program.

**A Bowen family systems perspective: Reflection III.** As described above, the idea of being uniquely positioned in my clients’ lives to offer understanding, compassion, and the freedom to be themselves, fulfilled my own need to offer these qualities and thus to be regarded as holding a special and appreciated position. I also felt relieved by embracing an understanding of the theory that relieved my sense of responsibility for my clients. In my own family, my parents and I had established an emotional triangle in which I took on a lot of emotional—if not practical—responsibility for their wellbeing. As my mother and I once figured out, it was as if I was the referee in their football game. The notion that I could sit back in the stands and simply be present in a way that was soothing to everyone was a way to opt out of responsibility entirely.

**The playful therapist.** Another change in my clinical work was that I was becoming more playful. I had recently read a book about play, in which Brown & Vaughn (2009) describe how entering into a state of play can foster the ability “to make new patterns, find the unusual among the common, and spark curiosity and alert observation” (p. 128). They defined the properties of play as being apparently purposeless, voluntary, and “having inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential,” and a “continuation desire” (p. 17).

These properties seemed to perfectly describe what was happening in Dr. Burnett's supervision sessions and in my sessions with clients. I kept running over the allotted time limit of the university clinic, frequently having 90 and 120-minute sessions, essentially because the conversations I was having with clients were so fascinating and seemed to be so mutually rewarding. Also, mirroring the supervision sessions, my clients and I began to laugh a lot more. In one case in particular this stood out to me.

The university clinic asked me to see a husband and wife, Doreen and Gerald, whose adult daughter had died very suddenly. I told the clinic that I was too inexperienced for such clients and suggested another therapist, but they encouraged me to take the case and we began having weekly sessions. Although I was worried that I was not skilled enough to be useful to the couple, I also knew that my capacity to be present with them might offer some, as yet unknown, benefit. As the weeks went on, I was surprised to observe that we were beginning to laugh together more and more. Doreen and Gerald both had a wicked sense of humor, and on many occasions they reduced me to uncontrollable tears of laughter.

They often commented on how nice it was to be able to joke around, something they said they felt unable to do with anyone else in their lives at the time. Eventually they revealed that they held beliefs about their daughter's death that fundamentally conflicted with those of their family and community, and which they had been unable to speak of before coming to therapy. I surmised that together we had created a space where they could grieve in their own ways, outside the expectations of the familial and religious communities to which they belonged—both through expressing the senselessness of the

death, and through the laughter that was an integral part of their personalities and their resilience.

**A Bowen family systems perspective: Reflection IV.** Looking back, I can see the emotional triangle that developed between the couple, their religious community, and me. When their daughter died, Doreen and Gerald suddenly found themselves on the outside of a community of people with whom they normally experienced an intense and comfortable level of togetherness. Perhaps their level of functioning and capacity to adapt to the loss of their daughter was impaired by the cutoff from their support network. Thus, entering into a triangle with me might have taken some of the pressure off those relationships for a while. The relief of this tension may have enabled their functioning to improve, allowing them to utilize their tremendous strengths and resources once again. This would be an example of symptom relief driven by functional improvement, as opposed to a change in the basic level of differentiation.

Similarly, my own functioning was very much buoyed by my participation in the emotional system with Dr. Burnett and the other supervisees. Later, my efforts to define a self would require that I learn to manage my own reactivity outside the togetherness processes of this emotional system. However, at the time, I was experiencing the benefits to my central nervous system brought about by participating in the emotional system of the training group, and of the Bowen community in general. I see the laughter and playfulness that emerged in the supervisor-therapist-client system including Doreen and Gerald, as indicative of the nature of the emotional field between us all. It was an atmosphere in which Doreen and Gerald felt free to express the complexity of their experience and to think more clearly about charting their own course through the oceans

of grief they were destined to sail, just as I was experiencing the freedom and creativity to develop as a clinician.

There is no way to know how I might have handled the case differently had I been part of a different supervisory triangle with these clients, but I surmised that the relaxed, playful energy of the supervision system was having a profound effect on my capacity to tolerate the uncertainty and suffering in my clients' lives. This tolerance meant that I was less likely to act in ways that were ultimately about binding my anxiety about their anxiety. Dr. Burnett's hands-off yet highly engaged style of supervision gave us the freedom to develop as individuals. I believe that this contributed significantly to my ability to engage with clients without being invested in a particular outcome. In retrospect, I came to appreciate that in order for Dr. Burnett to facilitate such an atmosphere, it was necessary for him to manage the competing expectations and demands of multiple anxious systems, including the clinic, the university administration, his fellow faculty, the students, our clients, the state, and the credentialing association, all of which must have held the potential to generate versions of his own primary emotional triangles.

### **Defining a Self: A Playful Bowenian**

**Bowen.** Over the course of the next few years I began to define myself as a clinician who was informed by Bowen theory. I repeatedly signed up for trimester-long supervision practicums with Dr. Burnett as an assistant supervisor, eventually taking a total of 10 practicums over five years. I also attended weekly meetings of *Bowen Club*, which was a voluntary 3-hour meeting created by Dr. Burnett and attended by students with an interest in natural systems theory. These meetings were very similar to the supervision practicums described above: remarkably free-ranging conversations through

which we explored the world through a natural systems lens. Outside of the department I attended conferences focused on Bowen family systems theory, and presented at a variety of conferences on my best thinking based on the theory at the time. Throughout this time my understanding of Bowen's ideas and how they applied in my work and personal life were constantly evolving. It is impossible to quantify the degree to which this period of thinking, practice, and relationships changed my life. However, I believe it to be one of the most deeply influencing, significant and transformative experiences I have ever had.

**Play.** I remained fascinated by the function of play in the therapist-client relationship, and intrigued by what I was experiencing as an isomorphic process in the supervisor-therapist-client relationship system (Lee & Everett, 2004). I continued to consider the effect of playfulness on this emotional triangle and to ask how playfulness and anxiety interacted at each node of the system. As I continued to feel more relaxed in therapy, the process proceeded to open up in new and unexpected ways. I had read that anxiety was "infectious" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 116) and I wondered if it was possible that the opposite was also true, and that playfulness might be the form that this contagion took.

At the time I was very focused on Bowen's observation that as people become more anxious, togetherness increases and people are less able to tolerate one another's individuality (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 121). I wondered if play, the "laboratory of the possible" (Henricks, 2008, p. 168), might create a relationship context in which clients could momentarily escape the gravitational pull of togetherness, to experience something I termed, *Levitation in Momentary Shouldlessness*. If so, I wondered how the expanded relational, cognitive, and affective possibilities of that temporary playground might shape

things beyond the therapeutic sandbox and extend into a client's life. When I presented my clinical work to the department as part of their capstone assessment process, I focused my thinking on what sort of presence a therapist offers that contributes to the conditions out of which playfulness might emerge.

**A Bowen family systems perspective: Reflection V.** I recognize that to some extent I was falsely equating my own experience of playfulness with a decrease in anxiety and as evidence of increased individuality. I eventually came to a better understanding of this after attending a training by Arthur Zipris, in which he described how experiencing a low level of anxiety can lead people to think that they're doing better (A. Zipris, personal communication, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018). He explained that solid self—the aspect of self that Bowen defined as stable under stress and uninfluenced by the relationship system (Bowen, 1992)—is not necessarily reflected in calmness. In fact, he pointed out that calmness is often a reflection of pseudo self, and that the goal of differentiation is to be able to stay clear in the face of anxiety and to function according to one's own values despite feeling anxious. As I continued to study and reflect, I became better at distinguishing between playfulness that functioned as a mechanism to manage my anxiety, and playfulness that was a measure of my ability to define a self in the face of anxiety.

At this stage in my development I had learned to see the world very differently and I had begun to manage myself very differently in relationships. However, in the primary emotional triangles of my family of origin I had not changed my functional position, and my understanding of differentiation was therefore extremely limited. I was, in fact, dubious about the potential for basic change. Although I believed in the



importance of working on my own differentiation, my orientation was to offer a presence to clients that was focused on acceptance and understanding. At the time, my online bio read, “Helen sees therapy as an opportunity for clients to relieve stress, gain different perspectives, and play with new ideas”. (Reynolds, 2017, January 13) Although I saw the value of clients experiencing reduced anxiety in sessions so that they could think more clearly and even playfully about their lives, I had limited expectations about the potential outcome of such an experience.

This is not to say that a short-term reduction in anxiety is not valuable or worthwhile, but that it is important to understand how the immediate management of anxiety fits into the bigger picture of anxiety management. Bowen family systems theory takes the perspective that an individual symptom is an expression of the interplay between multiple factors that are organized by the emotional processes across the systems of the body, the family, and the communities in which the family lives (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). With this understanding, it is possible to see that the short-term management of anxiety accomplished through increased togetherness, ultimately reduces the long-term adaptability of the system as a whole. However, a chronically anxious system is unlikely to increase its basic level of differentiation as long as the level of anxiety remains so high that the functioning of the individual members is held in place by the intensity of the emotional process. When thinking about playfulness in therapy, I realized that I needed to think about the function of play in the context of anxiety management throughout the whole multigenerational system.

In my own case, the playful experience of learning Bowen family systems therapy was contributing significantly to being calm enough to assimilate incredibly valuable but

challenging information. For example, two and a half years after I began studying Bowen family systems theory, I read the following passage by Roberta Gilbert (1992) on the plane journey to another family visit:

The inner guidance systems. . . play a major role when it comes to how far one can go with innate abilities and aptitudes. At higher levels of differentiation, the thinking part of the basic self. . . is more available and accessible for any purpose. . . . An individual might have, for example, a large amount of musical talent but not believe it. That belief will limit his or her achievement. (p. 21)

I felt absolutely crushed by this description, which perfectly explained how the emotional process was reflected in the underutilization my own talents. It struck me that the effects of differentiation on innate talent were like the epigenetic influence on genes. I wrote: “Having a really hard time reading. I am feeling sorrow about the idea that things could have been different. . . . I'm confused by this. It makes me feel bad and hopeless and want to reject the theory to make myself feel more comfortable. But then I think about the clarity and freedom of these recent small things that I have done” (H. T. M. Reynolds, journal entry, January 17, 2017).

Two days later, I wrote, “even during a visit in which I am being extremely thoughtful and pretty darned non-reactive, I can observe the physical reaction in my body [to interaction with parents]. . . . Maintaining a person-to-person relationship with both, and yet I know I remain caught in the same position in the triangle. Thank god for CB's perspective in combination with Bowen theory” (H. T. M. Reynolds, journal entry, January 19, 2017). In this journal entry, CB refers to Dr. Burnett and to the way in which his light-hearted, playful presence and his appreciation for the endless fascination of the

world in all its complexity, made it easier to manage the incredible distressing experience of confronting the realities of my own emotional process.

Perhaps this is a good example of the integration of individuality and togetherness helping to promote integration between thinking and feeling. For example, the togetherness processes of the supervisory relationship were soothing enough to my central nervous system that I could proceed somewhat thoughtfully. This was reflected in the abundant moments of joking and laughter that Dr. Burnett shared with his students, and the feeling of warmth and care that we felt for one another as human beings. The individuality was reflected in Dr. Burnett's consistency, clearly maintained boundaries, and emotional self-management. In combination, this created the conditions for what I termed the *Therapeutic Playground*. Henricks (2008) states, "most theories of human play associate play with the freedom of human beings to express themselves openly and to render creatively the conditions of their lives" (p. 159). There is no way to know, but I have always suspected that had I encountered Bowen's ideas outside a playful context, that I would have run a mile and never looked back.

**Integrating Bowen and playfulness.** My interest in the therapeutic playground remained, but as I gradually became clearer about the concept of differentiation, I found that I was less clear about how playfulness fit into an understanding of the emotional process. For a period of time my interest in the function of play waned. It seemed that play was simply "a medium through which family process works its art" (Friedman, 2000b, p. 212). Then, approximately three years after I began to study Bowen, two experiences intersected that both focused and expanded my thinking. The first involved

my participation in a training program based on Bowen family systems theory, and the second involved a series of events in my personal life related to pregnancy.

***I: Training.*** In October 2017 I joined the Bowen Theory South Florida (BTSF) training program run by Eileen Gotlieb and Jeffrey Miller. This annual training program consists of a series of monthly one-day trainings held over the course of an eight-month period. At each meeting, the morning session includes live or videoed presentations by Murray Bowen or scholars of Bowen family systems theory. Then, in the afternoon the training participants take turns to present to the facilitators on something they have been thinking about through a natural systems lens. Most of the time this entails presenting some aspect of the presenter's own emotional system.

My involvement in the training program has been life changing. I have benefitted from returning to a more scholarly study of theory, having spent a prolonged period of time thinking about Bowen's ideas without actually reading about them. This has made me much clearer about theory and sharper in my thinking. In the afternoon sessions I have had the opportunity to present on my family emotional system multiple times and gained a much richer understanding of the dynamics in my family. This understanding has been invaluable in my subsequent efforts to take responsibility for my own anxiety and to define a self in my family and other relationship systems.

***II: Pregnancy.*** One of the primary ways that chronic anxiety and unresolved emotional attachment have manifested in my life is around the issue of whether or not to have children. For over twenty years I had bound my anxiety in the resolution never to have children, and as I approached the end of my thirties I was faced with the reality of this choice. The last few years have included making the decision to have children,

attempting and failing to get pregnant, being diagnosed with fertility issues, embarking on in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures, becoming pregnant, and miscarrying. This intense period has increased anxiety in my family system, especially in the relationship with my mother, and therefore provided an excellent opportunity to observe the emotional process at work. I feel extremely fortunate to have joined the BTSF training program in the midst of my IVF treatment.

Bowen (1992) points out that during times of heightened anxiety it is much easier to see the workings of the emotional process than when a family is calm: “a family system in quiet equilibrium is less amenable to the discussion of emotional issues, or change, than a family in tension or stress” (p. 496). For me, this period of emotional intensity particularly highlighted my own reactivity to the system and the part I have played in contributing to our inability to adapt and function better. Seeing this has made it possible to be much clearer about how to handle myself differently, and in the last year I have made efforts that would not have been possible without this understanding. There have been a series of pivotal moments throughout this process when I was able to slow down enough to make a thoughtful decision that allowed me to change my functional position in several emotional triangles. Subsequent to these moments, I have noticed my overall functioning improve in all aspects of my life, including my clinical work.

*Differentiated play.* As I made changes in my own functioning, I began to notice that many of these critical moments had involved the following sequence:

1. A triggering interaction.
2. Recognition of my reactivity including the impulse to either:
  - a. Increase emotional distance.

- b. Increase emotional closeness.
3. A moment of thoughtfulness about the trigger and my reactivity to it in the wider context of the emotional process of the system.
4. Comprehension, based on previous thinking about the emotional system, of the relationship between my reactivity and longer term consequences, including predictions about:
  - a. The likely consequences of following the impulse.
  - b. The potential benefits of remaining in contact with the person without succumbing to the impulse.
5. A feeling of relative calmness accompanied by increased certainty about what action to take.
6. An interaction with the other person that incorporated some element of play—often by using humor.

Following this sequence, both myself and the other person seemed calmer, and were usually able to continue discussing the triggering issue with a lower degree of reciprocal reactivity. On several occasions this resulted in the sharing of information that was extremely useful to me, and that was pertinent in how I managed myself in future interactions.

After noticing this pattern I became fascinated once more in the relationship between playfulness and differentiation. I encountered Jaak Panksepp's work on the emotional systems of the brain, in which he describes neural PLAY circuitry and its place in evolutionary biology (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). I also read about the developing understanding of the variety of functions of play in non-human animals and what it might

tell us about our own playfulness. In my clinical work, I have become more attuned to when I am closer to having “the right emotional distance... between seriousness and humor” (Bowen, 1992, p. 229).

Thus, playfulness has become something of an emotional touchstone for me. I can check in with myself and make a judgment about my current capacity to be playful. Sometimes I feel unable to be playful, and at other times I feel compulsively playful. However, there are times when I feel that I have the choice—that both lightness and gravity are at my fingertips—and this usually occurs during periods when I feel the most energy and the greatest capacity to be neutral. I frequently ask myself in sessions, how can I get playful? More often than not I am able to access playfulness more easily when I have been able to be thoughtfully playful within the emotional system of my family.

Learning to be thoughtfully playful has been central to defining myself in every emotional system in my life. The feeling of playfulness has accompanied many of my greatest moments of discovery and understanding, and I believe it has been the form in which I have become a more integrated human being and clinician. At the beginning of my studies I particularly struggled with the feeling that I was losing my connection to a particular individual or group whenever I embraced a new set of ideas. I felt it when I adopted a natural systems lens, and I felt it initially when I began studying with BTSF. However, some of the greatest joys of my training so far have come in the last two years, from the experience of being connected in multiple relationships and figuring out for myself how to integrate the different ideas and resources in each of them. I believe that my best work as a clinician has come from the integration of what I have learned in my

relationship with Dr. Burnett with what I have learned with BTSF. For me, this is the most wonderful playground.

Thus, with a million questions to ask, I began this study where it all began for me—seeking to explore how other students of Bowen family systems theory had experienced play in their own training experiences and in their own emotional systems. What did play mean to them? How had their experiences of play developed over time? How did they play differently in different relationships and what was the interaction between their experiences of play in those relationships? Friedman (1991) points out two unique aspects of Bowen’s approach to therapy: the significance of the “being of the therapist,” (p. 138) and the importance of studying and applying the theory whilst “maintaining some type of disciple relationship with someone who has already gone through the process” (p. 139). I hope that this study can contribute to the understanding of the function of play in therapists’ own development as they study the theory in relationship to their supervisors.



## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Play**

Play is a conundrum that scientists have been grappling to understand for over a hundred years (Burghardt, 2005). It has been described as the foundation of human culture (Huizinga, 1955), as an integral facet of the human quest for knowledge (Bergen, 1988), and as the activity during which humans are most human (Ellis, 1988). However, even though we are the most playful species on the planet, we are certainly not alone in our propensity to play. Play has been documented in the behavior of most mammal groups and some bird species (Fagen, 1981), as well as in a range of fish (Burghardt, 2015), reptiles (Burghardt, 1998), and even invertebrates (Zylinski, 2015). In keeping with Bowen's approach to understanding human behavior through the study of evolutionary processes and natural systems (Kerr, 2002g), this chapter will begin by reviewing the literature on the evolution and function of play behaviors throughout the animal kingdom.

Adult chimpanzees and bonobos play airplane with their infants, as well as playfully push, bite, chase, pirouette, and somersault with one another (Palagi, 2006). Ravens have been observed repeatedly sliding down snow banks, engaging in activities that have the appearance of tag, and taking turns balancing on a swinging wire for no apparent reason other than trying to hold on as long as possible (Heinrich & Smolker, 1998). In recent years researchers have even begun to identify playful behaviors in species very different to our own. For example, some fish seem to engage in play-like behaviors by batting objects in their tanks (Burghardt, Dinets, & Murphy, 2015), komodo dragons play tug-of-war with their keepers (Burghardt, 2004), and even spiders have

engaged in behavior that researchers have categorized as play (Pruitt, Burghardt, & Riechert, 2012).

### **Defining Play**

Researchers have struggled to answer fundamental questions about what exactly qualifies as play, how and why it evolved, and how it has been maintained by natural selection across a vast range of species (Bekoff & Byers, 1998; Spinka, Newberry, & Bekoff, 2001). The study of play has been approached from a wide range of fields including anthropology, human development, education, history, psychology, and zoology, all of which have contributed to the observation and analysis of play through the lens of a specific theoretical orientation (Pellegrini, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 2009).

Although many scholars have attempted to create a set of criteria that describe play (e.g. Bekoff, 1984; Burghardt, 2010; Huizinga, 1955; Krasnor & Pepler, 1980; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983), there is still no universally accepted definition. The ongoing struggle to clarify and agree on the fundamental qualities of play exists for a variety of reasons. For example, Sutton-Smith (2009) suggests that play scholars are not always aware of the epistemological rhetoric within which they engage in research, and therefore of the inherent limitations deriving from the value system in which their scientific discourse is embedded. Some scholars believe that play is difficult to define because of its inherently ambiguous nature (Eberle, 2014; Sutton-Smith, 2009). Others point to the challenge of trying to study a subtle and ephemeral phenomenon that can emerge and disappear in the midst of non-playful activities (Bekoff & Byers, 1998; Henricks, 2008). Making the distinction between playful and non-playful activity is particularly difficult when the subject of observation involves non-human—and

especially non-mammalian—animals. Thus, Burghardt (2014) points to the need to use defining criteria that avoid “uncritical anthropomorphism” (p. 91).

Most researchers generally agree upon two criteria that are essential components of a definition of play: 1) that it is engaged in voluntarily, and 2) that the behavior is positively reinforcing to the organisms engaged in the playing (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). However, these two criteria alone are not sufficient, given that they describe other self-selected, enjoyable activities such as sex and eating. Many researchers also emphasize that play is emotionally fun (Bekoff, 2006; Burghardt, 2005; Eberle, 2014; Fagen, 1992), which Spinka et al. (2001) break down into the experiential components of excitement, pleasure, and relaxation. These aspects of play, all of which relate in some way to the subjective experience of the player, are associated with the idea that play is *autotelic*, being undertaken for its own sake rather than to meet a goal beyond the playful behavior itself (Burghardt, 2005). Pellegrini (2009) states, “probably the most basic and necessary aspects of play relate to the means over ends and nonfunctional dimensions,” and he points out that these features of play “enable the player to vary ordinarily functional behavior into different forms” (p. 20).

This characteristic of play is sometimes described as purposelessness (e.g. Bekoff & Allen, 1998; Brown & Vaughan, 2009). However, a problem with this label is the fact that play behaviors may have immediate and/or long-term functions (Burghardt, 2010; Eberle, 2014). Burghardt (2010) has therefore developed a working set of five criteria that incorporates the autotelic nature of play whilst retaining the possibility for play to serve a function beyond the positive reinforcement of the immediate activity. His first criteria states, “the performance of the behavior is not fully functional in the form or

context in which it is expressed; that is, it includes elements, or is directed toward stimuli, that do not contribute to current survival” (p. 14). He points out that this description is also inclusive of forms of play that involve an end goal, such as building a sandcastle.

Burghardt’s second criteria states that play is “spontaneous, pleasurable, rewarding, or voluntary” (Graham & Burghardt, 2010). This makes it possible for researchers to make inferences about the subjective experience of the player—which is not always available, especially in animals such as reptiles and fish—without requiring this knowledge in order to categorize a behavior as play (Burghardt, 2010). By combining the first two criteria, it is possible to exclude other pleasurable and rewarding behaviors such as mating, maternal care, eating, drinking and courtship, which may incorporate playfulness, but do not necessarily qualify as play because of the direct relationship between the behavior and the survival of the organism (Burghardt, 2010).

Burghardt summarized all five criteria in the following sentence: “*Play is repeated, seemingly non-functional behavior differing from more adaptive versions structurally, contextually, or developmentally, and initiated when the animal is in a relaxed, unstimulating, or low stress setting [italics in original]*” (Burghardt, 2014, p. 91).

His approach has received particular attention here because a number of eminent researchers now utilize his criteria in their own work and describe the usefulness of his definition, which has made it possible to identify and compare play behaviors in a wide variety of animal species (Graham & Burghardt, 2010; Held & Špinka, 2011; Panksepp & Biven, 2012; Pellis & Pellis, 2013). However, Pellegrini (2009) questions the binary categorization of behavior as either play or not-play. He points out that other scholars (Rubin et al., 1983) have defined play along a continuum of playfulness, and that

although play is a multi-dimensional construct, the individual criteria need not hold equal weight. Additionally, findings about the function of play as a stress-management mechanism may challenge Burghardt's supposition that play always takes place in a low-stress setting (Pellis & Pellis, 2013).

### **The Evolution of Play**

By comparing the available data on play in different species throughout the entire animal kingdom, it is logical to assume that play evolved multiple times and that it has evolved to serve different functions (Burghardt, 2005; Pellis, Burghardt, Palagi, & Mangel, 2015; Pellis & Pellis, 2013). However, despite the increasing data on play in a wide range of species, only five of the approximately thirty phyla of animals contain species that play, which suggests that the necessary conditions for fostering play rarely occur (Burghardt, 2005; Pellis et al., 2015). Pellis et al. (2015) suggest that two key conditions are: "(1) excess resources in a slowly developing organism with a complex behavioral repertoire, and (2) some measure of protection from predation either because of parental vigilance or some fortuitous environmental context" (2015, p. 3).

**Stages of evolution.** Burghardt (2004) suggests that the evolution of play may involve three stages: *primary process play*, *secondary process play*, and *tertiary process play*. Primary process play includes incipient play behaviors that arise as the byproduct of circumstances such as boredom and excess metabolic energy, but which have few, if any, immediate or long-term adaptive results (Graham & Burghardt, 2010). Once a play behavior has emerged, it may then evolve into secondary process play, which does serve an adaptive role in the physiological and behavioral development of the species (Burghardt, 2004). Finally, natural selection may evolve a play behavior to the level of

tertiary process play, which includes play behavior “that has gained a major, if not critical, role in modifying and enhancing behavioral abilities and fitness, including the development of innovation and creativity” (Burghardt, 2005, p. 119). Bekoff (1984) proposes that the origins of the earliest forms of incipient play behaviors originate in prenatal activity that serves to facilitate neuromuscular development, and that after birth this behavior was molded by the natural selection according to the pressures of the environment and the physiological constraints of the animal.

**The evolution of play in the family system.** Pellis and Pellis (2013) provide an explanation for how a functionless juvenile play behavior could evolve into an essential developmental component as a result of evolutionary processes interacting with the structure of a family system. They point out that many complex behavioral systems such as reproduction, hunting, and nest building, develop in a piecemeal fashion as an animal matures. Thus, constituent pieces of the behavior system appear as precocious behaviors before the whole behavior system is formed and fully functional. Using murid rodents as an example, Pellis and Pellis describe how the family environment may have played a significant role in shaping the precocious sexual behavior of juvenile murid rodents into an advanced and behaviorally distinct form of play.

***Siblings.*** Murid rodents have large litters, and during the time that juveniles are developing the skills necessary for reproduction, they therefore have ample opportunity for precocious sexual interactions with their siblings (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Pellis and Pellis explain that the existence of a guaranteed *developmental niche* such as this has important repercussions for evolution. They point out that when an environment consistently provides something that is vital to a particular species, natural selection may

eventually shift the composition of the population to include animals that rely on the environmental resource rather than maintain the physiological mechanisms necessary for independently generating the resource. For example, our ancestors lived on a stable, fruit-rich diet that supplied an abundance of vitamin C, which—as a matter of efficiency—enabled them to gradually discard the biochemical machinery necessary for manufacturing their own (Pellis & Pellis, 2013).

For murid rodents, the sibling-rich environment involving plenty of incipient play in the form of precocious sexual behavior, could become a substitute for the costly biochemical machinery necessary for learning to calibrate their movements during reproduction (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Pellis and Pellis propose that once established, this emerging play behavior begins to provide “essential, experiential feedback for wiring the brain,” (p. 117) and that the functional value of the behavior may lead to further neurological changes in the population until it becomes “an essential component of the normal developmental experience” (p. 119). Finally, Pellis and Pellis propose that the play can develop in frequency, organization, and complexity to serve novel functions that assist in the development of more general social competence, which will be discussed in the section on the function of play.

***Parents.*** Burghardt (2004) points to other aspects of the family system that may have contributed to creating the conditions in which play could emerge. He notes that before the evolution of protracted parental care, animals needed to be born with a comprehensive, fully functioning set of instinctive behavior patterns that would enable their survival. However, as parental functioning gradually increased and substituted for

the adaptive functioning of their offspring, the young became more parasitic and had to develop survival skills whilst sheltered and fed by their parents (Burghardt, 2004).

Burghardt (2004) suggests that this environment may create more opportunities for play to develop compared to species in which the young are more fully developed at birth. The evolution of parental care also allowed for more experiences in less stimulating environments, and thus boredom may have been an important factor in the development of behaviors done for their own sake (Burghardt, 2004). In some great ape species the mothers actively play with their young (Biben & Suomi, 1993). The early occurrence of maternal play in such species may give juveniles a head start so that later peer-to-peer play interactions can be used to explore a greater and more nuanced range of possibilities (Pellis & Pellis, 2013).

**Context.** Other contextual factors that influence the development of play in any given species include physiological and environmental constraints and resources such as the social organization of the species, diet, habitat, metabolic rate, environmental stress (Burghardt, 2004; O'Meara, Graham, Pellis, & Burghardt, 2015) and the relative size of the cortico-cerebellar system (Kerney, Smaers, Schoenemann, & Dunn, 2017). Burghardt (2004) also suggests that much play appears to derive from the behavioral repertoire of the species. For example, he proposes that predators are more likely to engage in complex object play, and that prey animals are more likely to engage in escape-related locomotor play.

### **The Function of Play**

In the field of evolutionary biology, the term *function* refers to the ways in which a behavior benefits an animal in its capacity to survive and reproduce. For example,



Bekoff (1984) states that the function of a given play behavior refers to “the specific consequences of a behavioral pattern that have resulted in its fixation in a species' repertoire by natural selection” (p. 7). There is a growing body of research to suggest that play is multifunctional, and that it serves different benefits in different species at different periods of development (Burghardt, 2005; Pellis, Pellis, & Bell, 2010). However, not everyone agrees with this. For example, Spinka et al. (2001) state, “there is a basic phylogenetic and functional unity underlying mammalian play” (p. 142), and have proposed that the major function of play is training for the unexpected.

**Immediate v. delayed benefits.** Play is most common in immature animals, and the majority of theories have focused on the ways in which play during the juvenile stage improves performance in adulthood (Burghardt, 2005; Pellis, Pellis, & Bell, 2010). However, play may also have immediate benefits, such as physical exercise, establishing social roles (Burghardt, 2005), gaining dominance (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), modulating aggression (Drea, Hawk, & Glickman, 1996), and self assessment (Thompson, 1998). In addition to deferred and immediate benefits, Pellegrini (2009) adds a third classification, *accelerated developmental benefits*, which refers to the possibility that play may help to speed up the rate that an animal develops a skill. This theory is in keeping with the observation that play occurs less frequently in resource-poor environments than in resource-rich environments, and that its functions are therefore more likely to be beneficial than critical for development (Pellis & Pellis, 2013).

**Early play theories.** Many theories have been advanced to explain the function of play, but on the whole they remain unsupported by empirical research (Burghardt, 2005; Power, 2000; Sharpe, 2005). Burghardt (2004, 2005) highlights three leading

theories of the last 150 years, which were ultimately dismissed but which laid the groundwork for later research. Although there was insufficient data to evaluate these early theories for many years, they contain many of the enduring seminal ideas about the origin and possible functions of play (Burghardt, 2005).

***Surplus energy theory.*** This theory, put forth by Friedrich Schiller (1795/1967) and developed by Herbert Spencer (1872) proposed that play originated in behaviorally complex species that had more advanced skills for obtaining food, avoiding predators, and managing the day-to-day problems of existence (Burghardt, 2005). Spencer hypothesized that this led to “higher animals” building up excess energy that was then transformed into play, thus conceptualizing play as a side effect of typical mammalian adaptations (Spinka et al., 2001).

***Instinct-practice theory.*** Whereas surplus energy theory focused on the proximate causes of play, instinct-practice theory considered play in terms of its survival value (Burghardt, 2005). This theory was formulated by Karl Groos (1898), who believed that most behavior patterns involved both instinct and experience, and that the instincts of more intelligent animals were not sufficient without practice. He stated, “animals cannot be said to play because they are young and frolicsome, *but rather they have a period of youth in order to play*; for only by so doing can they supplement the insufficient hereditary endowment with individual experience in view of the coming tasks in life” (1898, p. 75). The orientation on practicing for the future still underlies much of the human and nonhuman animal research into play (Burghardt, 2004)

***Recapitulation theory.*** In contrast with Groos, Stanley Hall (1904), a major figure in developmental psychology, believed that play behaviors were the vestiges of ancient

instincts that reappeared during individual development. He therefore saw little adaptive value in play, but hailed the importance of enjoying play for its “*interest, zest, and spontaneity,*” (p. 207) and the opportunity to “touch and revive the deep basic emotions of the race” (p. 202).

**Emerging theories about the functions of play and their connections to  
Bowen family systems theory.**

*Learning from play fighting rats.* According to Kerr (2002g), Bowen was fond of saying, “When you get bogged down in a question about theory, go back to the rats. The rats don’t lie” (p. 9). This is particularly apt advice, given that the study of play fighting in rats has yielded fascinating insights that help us to understand the playfulness of human beings. The following overview will focus on the work of Sergio and Vivien Pellis, whose studies into the play fighting of rats suggest that play may have a significant role in 1) anxiety management and 2) the development of emotional calibration. Pellis and Pellis are neuroscientists who have been on the forefront of play research for over thirty years. In their seminal work, *The Playful Brain: Venturing to the Limits of Neuroscience* (2013), they synthesize decades of empirical research and present new findings based on their studies.

Pellis and Pellis (2013) point out that when trying to understand the nature of play, it is important to qualify how the play behaviors of one species are related to those of another—such as play-fighting cockroaches and gorillas. They explain that their approach is to focus attention on the varieties of a specific form of play in a particular lineage, and then to use comparative analysis to discover what can be generalized to other species and what is novel to each species. In combination with experimental laboratory

research, this approach has provided them with data about the brain changes that might have accompanied the advances in play behavior throughout evolution, and provided clues to understanding how and why play evolved.

*Play fighting.* Play fighting, or rough-and-tumble play, is one of the most commonly reported types of play documented by researchers (Pellis & Pellis, 2007), and the most detailed and extensive research on play fighting has focused on laboratory rats (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Rats have evolved complex patterns of play fighting with neurological control mechanisms that resemble those of some primates and even some human traits (Pellis & Pellis, 1998, 2013). As will be discussed, an important feature of play fighting seems to be its role in establishing and testing social relationships. This is facilitated by the inherent ambiguity of the play-fighting context, within which it is possible to recover from a boundary transgression by communicating, “I was only kidding!” (Pellis & Pellis, 1996, p. 249).

*The evolution of play fighting into humor.* In nonhuman animals play fighting involves physical contact, but the size of human social networks precludes physical contact as a practical means of tracking our social relationships (Dunbar, 1998). Pellis and Pellis (2013, pp. 142-144) propose that an earlier form of physical play fighting similar to that observed in rats may have evolved into a verbal form of play fighting that serves some of the same functions: humor. Humor closely resembles play fighting in its inherent ambiguity, and it serves as a way to share both intimacy and information (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Humor mirrors play fighting in other ways. For example, the facial characteristics of laughter are similar to the open-mouthed expressions seen in primates and many other mammals during play fighting (Pellis & Pellis, 1998, 2013), and laughter

is used during social situations to mitigate problems or social ambivalence (Caron, 2002), especially by dampening friction and establishing social hierarchy (Gervais & Wilson, 2005).

Pellis and Pellis (2013) state, “it is conceivable. . . that with the advent of spoken language, humans developed a verbal, non-physical form of play fighting, a form of social interaction that is intimate, informative, and ambiguous” (p. 143). Thus, understanding the physical forms of play fighting from which our own verbal play fighting evolved may provide us with valuable information that helps us to understand the functioning of this behavior. Of particular relevance to Bowen family systems theory is the fact that much of the research into play fighting seems to point to its role in managing emotional processes. The following section will outline these ideas.

### **1) Play fighting and anxiety management.**

*Stress reduction.* Play fighting may be instrumental in reducing the severity of the stress response (Pellis et al., 2015; Pellis & Pellis, 2013). To illustrate this, Pellis and Pellis (2013) describe a study in which rats were placed in another group’s territory and subsequently attacked by the dominant male. When the dominant male was removed, the rat subjects that had been reared in social groups increased their level of play fighting. Pellis and Pellis point out that although play typically takes place in non-stressful situations, this study and others like it suggest that moderate levels of stress seem to promote the occurrence of play. For example, Arelis (2006) conducted a study in which juvenile rats were injected with adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ATCH), which stimulates the release of corticosterone—the equivalent of cortisol in humans. After being injected with ATCH, rats played two to three times more than the saline-injected control group.

Arelis (2006) also found that when rats were given the opportunity to play, their corticosterone levels went down.

These findings are consistent with the comparative literature on other animals, including primates, which indicates that “play fighting serves as a means of social cohesion by reducing tension and stress” (Pellis & Pellis, 2013, p. 100) For example, Palagi, Cordoni, and Borgognini Tarli (2004) observed that in a group of bonobo chimps, social play between adults and unrelated immature chimps peaked before feeding-time, suggesting that play might serve a similar function to grooming behaviors to limit aggression and increase tolerance around food (Palagi et al., 2004; Palagi, Paoli, & Tarli, 2006). Pellis and Pellis (2013) note that social grooming and social play are both sensitive to manipulation of the opioid system (Guard, Newman, & Roberts, 2002), and that play may help to regulate stress by triggering the release of opioids.

Pellis and Pellis (2013) state that the mechanisms underlying the relationship between play and stress reduction are still unknown, but they hypothesize that the neural circuitry and chemical signals involved in social bonding may play a significant role. They highlight the role of the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin, which have been shown to affect the bond between pair mates by making closeness rewarding and separation aversive. Pellis and Pellis point to preliminary data (Panksepp, 2004) that suggests these neurochemicals also influence the expression of play. Perhaps, as more information about the biochemistry of play emerges, it will become evident how playfulness functions as an expression of the togetherness process.

*Negotiating the social system.* Studies by Ciani, Dall'Olio, Stanyon, and Palagi (2012) into the play fighting of macaque societies, demonstrate that play behaviors—

which the researchers point out are plastic and versatile by nature—reflect the social dynamics of the group. For example, in relatively solitary species where the organization of the group results in limited social contact between members, play fighting likely provides a tool for social assessment and manipulation (Pellis & Iwaniuk, 2000) such as sexual play used for courtship purposes (Ciani et al., 2012). Thus, in species that are highly reactive to social proximity, play provides a way to manage necessary moments of increased closeness and connection.

Pellis and Pellis (2013) have demonstrated several contexts in which rats use play fighting to manage their social position relative to other rats. In a laboratory setting, when two unfamiliar male rats are placed in neutral territory, they play fight to establish which is the dominant male. Pellis and Pellis have also observed that familiar rats living together in a colony use play fighting to manage their relationships with the dominant male. Submissive rats tend to playfully attack the dominant male and then respond to his counter attack with juvenile-typical defense maneuvers. Pellis and Pellis conclude that the rats are communicating subservience at the same time as maintaining familiarity with the dominant male to avoid the risk of being attacked as a stranger. Play fighting can also provide a means for subordinate rats to test their relationships with dominant rats, and even to reverse the social hierarchy (Pellis, Pellis, & Reinhart, 2010).

***Play fighting and anxiety management through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory.*** These findings suggest that social play behaviors offer a variety of mechanisms for managing the stresses inherent in social living. Kerr (1988) states, “to function as part of a society, an animal must relinquish its ‘individuality’ and be guided by the needs of the group” (p. 63). He points to territoriality, physical spacing, home

range, and dominance hierarchies as emotionally driven group processes that serve to reduce conflict and increase social cohesion. Studies into play fighting seem to demonstrate that play may serve as a mechanism for negotiating these processes. As described in the section on the evolution of play, incipient play behaviors that originally served one function can evolve into *emancipated* play behaviors that are independent of their original functioning (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). It is possible that many species have evolved play behaviors into novel ways of managing the togetherness process. This may be achieved in a least two ways, as described above: 1) the ambiguity of play creates opportunities for receiving information about other individuals in order to be able to adapt according to the social structure of the group, and 2) the physiological calming effects of play can be used to decrease the anxiety experienced during emotionally intense social interactions.

**Play fighting and emotional calibration.**

**Benefits.** Play may also be an important factor in the development of emotional calibration (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). When rats are prevented from playing during the juvenile period, they have many cognitive and emotional deficits as adults, such as difficulty coordinating movements with other rats and hyper-defensiveness (Graham & Burghardt, 2010). Pellis and Pellis (2013) note that the behaviors of such socially isolated rats resemble the symptoms of stress, including “reduced fluidity of movement, a tendency to either underreact or overreact, a delay in taking action, and so on” (p. 79). They point out that depriving animals of the chance to play does not seem to cause deficits in specific motor, social or cognitive skills, but rather it impairs an animal’s



ability to appropriately calibrate its emotional response to a given situation, thus impairing the animal's ability to appropriately and adequately use its skills.

A fascinating study by Deutsch and Larsson (1974) illustrates this point. Rhesus monkeys that had been reared in isolation were presented with a wooden figure in the shape of a monkey on all fours. The monkeys were capable of mounting the carved monkey and engaging in the appropriate sequence of movements involved in copulation. However, when the same monkeys were presented with real female monkeys, they tended toward passivity, withdrawal, or aggressiveness, and were unsuccessful in mounting the females. Pellis and Pellis (2013) state that the male's failure to coordinate their movements effectively was due to their fearfulness and over-reactivity when faced with a live partner.

They (Pellis & Pellis, 2013) hypothesize that play may benefit animals by refining their ability to manage potentially threatening or stressful situations, and producing animals that are more resilient and "better able to deal with the vicissitudes of life" (p. 109). They state:

A fearful and anxious animal is one that is not fully capable of bringing to bear, in any given situation, all its motor and cognitive skills. Thus, when play fighting, animals are not refining motor, cognitive, or social skills, but rather are learning how to calibrate and match their emotional reactions to an unpredictable world.

(p. 162)

However, Pellis and Pellis caution that if play experiences produce animals that are overly confident, such animals may be inadequately responsive to potential dangers such as predators and unfamiliar environments. Thus, in the development of emotionally well-

calibrated animals, there may be an optimum level of play. The following section describes several aspects of play that may be instrumental in the development of emotional calibration.

***Mechanisms.***

*Reciprocity.* An interesting attribute of play fighting is that it requires a balance of cooperation and competition (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Without competition play fighting would be too predictable and thus cease to be pleasurable, but without cooperation it would too easily escalate into aggression (Pellis, Pellis, & Reinhart, 2010). Animals achieve cooperation by self-handicapping (Bekoff, 2006) and sending play signals such as gestures, facial expressions, and vocalizations (Palagi et al., 2016). Different species have evolved play behaviors that incorporate a different balance of reciprocity, all of which involve the capacity to appropriately judge the behavior of others (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Pellis and Pellis (2013) suggest that as a part of this process, animals learn that to keep playing means accepting some pain. They point out that this might involve physical pain as well as the psychological pain resulting from loss of control. Pellis and Pellis propose that this aspect of play provides the opportunity for animals to learn to make more nuanced social judgments and thus to become more social competent.

*Unpredictability.* Another aspect of play that may contribute to the development of emotional calibration is its unpredictability. Pellis and Pellis (2013) observe that during play fighting, rats adopt tactics that reduce their control over their own and their partner's movements, which provides a means to fine-tune the stress response system. Spinka et al. (2001) hypothesize that such unpredictability is key to a major ancestral function of play: training for the unexpected. They propose that when animals play they

lose control of their movements, position, and sensory/spatial input, and that they must improvise to regain control by combining conventional and atypical movements. Thus, recovering from shocks such as falling, being pinned, shaken, or knocked down “enhances the ability of animals to cope emotionally with unexpected situations” (Spinka et al., 2001, p. 143).

A series of experiments (Anderson, Mc Kenney, & Mason, 1977; Eastman & Mason, 1975; Mason, 1978; Mason & Berkson, 1975) in which baby rhesus monkeys were separated from their mothers at birth and raised with either a stationary or a mobile artificial surrogate, provide further data suggesting the importance of being exposed to the kind of unpredictable movements experienced in play. The monkeys that were reared by the mobile surrogates grew up to be more outgoing, social, and attentive to new social stimuli. Pellis and Pellis (2013) suggest that this social competence emerged out of the social experience created by the random movements of the surrogate mechanical mothers, which gave the infant monkeys the chance to have a reciprocal experience of approaching and withdrawing with a quality of uncertainty. Pellis and Pellis note that the monkeys with mobile mothers initiated play fighting three times more often than the infants with stationary mothers.

*Neurological integration.* Remarkably, the play fighting of decorticated rats is seemingly normal—they instigate play with the same frequency, use the species-typical patterns of defense, and play with the same vigor as intact rats (Panksepp, Normansell, Cox, & Siviy, 1994; Pellis & Pellis, 2013). This indicates that the main neurological mechanisms for regulating play must be located in the brainstem (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). However, Pellis and Pellis (2013) point out that decorticated male rats are unable to

modulate their play tactics based on the status of their play partner, suggesting that the cortex plays a role in modulating the expression of the brainstem-generated play behaviors.

By comparing the relatively simple play of mice with the highly complex play of rats, Pellis and Pellis (2013) have concluded that the neural developments necessary to evolve from a mouse-like brain to a rat brain probably include changes in the regulatory mechanisms that control the brainstem. These changes, according to Pellis and Pellis, are likely to involve the mechanisms involved in motivation and reward. They suggest that “such a modification would lead to. . . changes in *the emotional regulatory systems that enable animals to sustain more frequent and prolonged interactions while still maintaining a playful mood* [italics added]” (p. 48).

***Emotional calibration and Bowen Family Systems Theory.*** With a single substitution, the quote above reads, “such a modification would lead to. . . changes in the emotional regulatory systems that enable [therapists] to sustain more frequent and prolonged interactions while still maintaining a playful mood.” Given what has already been described about training therapists in accordance with Bowen family systems theory, it is interesting to consider how the development of the playful brain mirrors the development of the therapist. In both cases, the cortex is gradually developing the capacity to modulate the primary emotional processes generated in the subcortical areas of the brain, albeit on a different time scale. In the case of the evolving brain, the changes are happening over the course of millennia, whereas in the case of the therapist the changes take years.

This process seems to be consistent with the aspect of interpersonal differentiation described earlier, involving the integration of the thinking and feeling systems. Pellis and Pellis (2013) state that the cortical controls that are added in the development of the playful brain do not add new behavior patterns, they modify those of the brainstem: “the really dramatic changes in the complexity of play fighting arise from having cortical control systems that can ‘play’ with brain-stem generated behavior” (p. 131). This emphasizes that it is the relationship between the two brain systems that is critical to the development of more nuanced social play, and—as a result—social competence.

The idea that play may help animals learn to tolerate some pain in order to keep playing (Pellis & Pellis, 2013) is also noteworthy. Jeffrey Miller (J. Miller, personal communication, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018) has emphasized that learning to tolerate anxiety is one of the biggest predictors that a person will be able to develop more self in an anxious emotional system. He points out that to act thoughtfully in accordance with one’s values and principles requires sticking to one’s guns despite the anxious compulsion to do otherwise, and that learning to do so is critical to the process of self differentiation. Thus, aspects of play that help to build tolerance to discomfort could potentially serve in the development of the capacity to regulate self.

### **From Nonhuman Animal Play to Human Play**

The findings described so far provide a basis for understanding how socially complex play behaviors may have evolved in a variety of nonhuman mammals, and what functions those behaviors may serve in the management of anxiety and the development of emotional calibration. However, humans are not rats. Our play behaviors are incredibly varied and complex compared to nonhuman species, ranging from the fantasy

play of a seven year old defending the planet with her super-sonic-glitter-blaster, to a chess game played by octogenarians. To what extent can the research into nonhuman animals provide insight into our own behaviors?

Power (2000) suggests that at best, play researchers are limited to making tentative hypotheses based on their observations of living animals and their knowledge of evolutionary biology, and he points out that there is always a danger of confusing an analogous behavior for a homological one. However, he states that these challenges should not prevent researchers from utilizing data from other species, and that using a comparative approach can help researchers to develop and refine theories about the evolution of human behavior.

Power (2000) also notes that when comparative analysis involves a wide range of related species it is much less limited than when only two species are compared. Although Pellis and Pellis focus heavily on experimental studies involving laboratory rats, their research is grounded in a detailed examination of play behavior across a vast range of species. Pellis and Pellis (2013) point out that their focus on the play fighting of rats provides them with a large amount of data to use in comparative analysis with other species. Exploring these comparisons helps them to understand which features of play fighting can be generalized to other species and which cannot, and to make hypotheses about the relationships between different play features and the social and neural mechanisms underlying their development.

**Play and the human brain.** Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002) point out that despite the growing consensus about how much of our physiology we share with nonhuman animals, “substantial evolutionary remodeling” (p. 1570) has taken place in

the millions of years since humans diverged from a common ancestor with our closest relative, the chimpanzee. They suggest that the challenge is for scientists to establish what we have inherited unchanged, what has been modified, and what is qualitatively new. Perhaps the greatest example of what sets us apart from other animals is our capacity to think and communicate symbolically. The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1944) said that because of this ability, “compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new *dimension* of reality” (p. 24).

As described in chapter one, Bowen family systems theory emphasizes the expansion of opportunities that are possible for the human species because of how our brains have evolved. However, it also recognizes that our advanced cognitive abilities continue to be organized by ancient emotional processes. Thus, even if the human capacity for language is possible only because of the evolution of uniquely human neural structures—such as the *language organ* proposed by Chomsky (1983)—this development can still be understood to have evolved as a particular adaptation shaped by the same emotional processes that influence the behaviors of all living things. As Haidt (2012) put it:

Automatic processes run the human mind, just as they have been running animal minds for 500 million years, so they’re very good at what they do, like software that has been improved through thousands of product cycles. When human beings evolved the capacity for language and reasoning. . . the brain did not rewire itself to hand over the reins to a new and inexperienced charioteer. (p. 53)

Furthermore, Chomsky points out that the environment in which a child grows up plays a major role in the specific development of the neural structures responsible for language.

This interaction between the environment and physiology may be particularly relevant for the role of play in neural development.

Panksepp (2007) points out that although human genes contain enough information to produce the sophisticated brains that we are born with, genes alone are insufficient to encode and organize “a fully-developed social mind” (p. 57). He suggests that the influence of family and other social contexts are necessary environments for shaping the emotional and cognitive tools with which we are born. For Panksepp, social play is an important process for shaping the brain, and he points to data from nonhuman animal studies (Panksepp, Burgdorf, Turner, & Gordon, 2003), which suggest that abundant play facilitates maturation of the frontal lobe. Panksepp (2007) suggests that for human children, pro-social play promotes equivalent neural development, and thus enhances the capacity for regulation of primary-process emotional urges, self-reflection, behavioral flexibility, goal-directed behaviors, and imagination.

Porges (2015), the originator of polyvagal theory, provides an explanation for how play may strengthen the neural circuitry necessary for regulating our ancient defense mechanisms and giving us the capacity to remain calm and engaged. He suggests that this has to do with the concept of *neuroception*: the unconscious process in which we constantly evaluate environmental risk. Porges states that our physiological response to cues from the environment can trigger the neuroception of safety, allowing us to socially engage. However, he states that if the cues trigger the neuroception of danger we prepare to mobilize in fight or flight, and if the cues trigger the neuroception of imminent threat to our survival, we become immobilized and social contact is inhibited.



Porges (2015) describes play as a training activity in which social cues oscillate between safety and danger. Using the universal game of peek-a-boo as an illustration, he describes how parents lead young children through an emotional sequence that starts out by eliciting uncertainty (hiding), followed by danger signals that engage the sympathetic nervous system (“Boo!”), and then sends calming cues that trigger down-regulation of the sympathetic nervous system and re-engage the social engagement system (smiling, warm facial expressions etc.). Porges proposes that this gives infants the opportunity to navigate a sequence of affective states, and that repetition improves the child’s capacity to regulate fight/flight/freeze behaviors. He even draws a parallel with the process of psychotherapy:

As the neural regulation of our social engagement system improves, we gain resilience in dealing with disruptions in our lives. . . . A deconstruction of a therapeutic session will find the client (and often the therapist) shifting states from calm to defense and back to calm. (p. 5)

**Humans at play.** Our highly evolved brains with their capacity to think and communicate symbolically, embedded within the complex social networks of family, community, and culture, mean that we are capable of many kinds of play with many potential benefits. Like other animals, humans engage in locomotor play, object play, and social play (Burghardt, 2014), but our cognitive and communicative abilities mean that we can also engage in uniquely human forms of play such as sociodramatic play and rule-governed games (Power, 2000).

Critically, play and playfulness can also be seen as a state of mind—as a way of engaging the world no matter what the content of an activity (Brown & Vaughan, 2009). Bateson (2013) points to the personal accounts of a variety of scientists who describe the

playfulness inherent in their work. For example, Alexander Fleming, who discovered the antibacterial properties of penicillin, said of his work: “I play with microbes” (Maurois, 1959, p. 211). Nobel Prize winner Jim Watson, who along with Francis Crick described the chemical structure of DNA, described a particular point in their process as requiring that they “construct a set of molecular models and begin to play” (Watson, 2012, pp. 44-45).

Likewise, Richard Feynman (1985), a theoretical physicist who contributed significantly to the field of quantum physics, described playfulness as central to his approach. Writing about a moment when, earlier in his career, he had become burned out, he stated:

I used to enjoy doing physics. . . . I used to play with it. I used to do whatever I felt like doing - it didn't have to do with whether it was important for the development of nuclear physics, but whether it was interesting and amusing for me to play with. (p. 157)

Having reengaged his drive to play, Feynman then made a seemingly idle observation about a wobbling plate that led to discoveries for which he was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize. Feynman stated, “It was effortless. It was easy to play with these things. It was like uncorking a bottle. . . . I almost tried to resist it! There was no importance to what I was doing, but ultimately there was” (p. 158).

These are examples of playfulness at the heart of innovation and invention, but play has been associated with numerous other aspects of human development. For example, Eberle (2011) suggests that play trains human linguistic intelligence. He points to the possible connection between the astonishing explosion of invention and

exploration that took place approximately 40,000 years ago, and the advent of the human capacity to pretend and speculate. Dawkins (2004) suggests that the enormous shift that took place at this time after millions of years of seeming cultural stability, might have coincided with the new ability to speak conditionally, which “would have enabled ‘what-if’ imagination to flower” (p. 49).

Eberle (2011) also posits that play lays the foundation for interpersonal intelligence. He suggests that sociodramatic play provides children with an opportunity to explore relationships in a way that helps to enrich an appreciation for cause-and-effect and boundaries, and that “stirs a moral narrative that orders the world” (p. 26). Eberle highlights the importance of the cooperation and competition inherent in play, which he believes helps to develop empathy and the ability to make distinctions about other people’s moods and motivations.

Other researchers have suggested a link between playfulness and the development of adaptive coping skills. For example, Saunders, Sayer, and Goodale (1999) found a significant positive correlation between children’s playfulness and their coping skills. Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil (2005) suggest that for children and adults, playfulness enhances adaptation by helping people to solve problems and to deal with frustration, anxiety, and depression. They also point out that a playful state of mind influences perception, and therefore alters how people make meaning of their daily lives.

In his summary of the history of play studies Henricks (2008) notes that play is understood as a means for people to grow emotionally, morally and intellectually; to learn new strategies; and to be strengthened by experiencing both success and failure. He argues that play “expands people’s sense of their ‘freedom to’ accomplish certain things”

and states that “in play we can ‘be ourselves’ in imaginative and expansive ways” (p. 169). Interestingly, Power (2000) notes that play researchers have typically not focused on the aspects of social interaction that arise in play, such as “aggression, conflict resolution, prosocial behavior, social skills, and dominance hierarchies” (p. 119).

**Play in early human society.** The developmental/evolutionary psychologist, Peter Gray (2009) has put forth a fascinating thesis about the playful nature of hunter-gatherer groups that provides a way of understanding how the forms and functions of play may have evolved in early human society. Gray points out that the social structure and attitudes of hunter-gatherer societies throughout the world are remarkably similar, and that this suggests that the culture of these groups is likely to be similar to the hunter-gatherer societies that existed in pre-agricultural times<sup>2</sup>. His theory is based on the descriptions of many different researchers, whose observations of hunter-gatherer groups indicate that humor and playfulness were ubiquitous in these group’s social lives.

Gray (2009) defines play as voluntary and self-directed; intrinsically motivated; guided by mental rules; imaginative; and involving an active, alert, non-stressed state of mind. He states that the most basic freedom of play is the choice to quit playing, and that the process of a play activity is more important than its outcome. Additionally, he suggests that because play is neither a response to an interpersonal demand or an immediate biological need, play is relatively free from stressful emotions. For Gray, the key elements of a well-operating social game involve:

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<sup>2</sup> The hunter-gatherer societies referred to by Gray (2009) belong to the category of *immediate-return* hunter-gatherer societies, which are now almost completely extinct. Studied primarily in the 60s and 70s, they lived in small, egalitarian, mobile groups and owned little property (Gray, 2009).

- Voluntary participation
- Allowance for significant individual autonomy within the rules of the game
- Taking the needs of all the players equally into account
- Sharing materials, and
- Consensual decision-making (p. 486)

Gray (2009) states that these characteristics are “precisely the elements that anthropologists refer to repeatedly, and often emphatically, in their discussions of social relationships and governance in hunter-gatherer societies” (p. 487). He explains that hunter-gatherer societies live in bands, and that while the cohesion and stability of the band is valued, individuals are free to move from one band to another. Ingold (1999) describes this as a form of autonomy that connects individuals to one another without creating dependencies. Gray states that in general, contractual exchanges are not found within the culture of these societies. For example, he points out that gifts are given without expectation of reciprocation, and that efforts to influence the behavior of others happen in indirect forms that respect the individual’s right to choose. Gray clarifies that this respect for autonomy rests on the assumption that every individual will ultimately act in the best interests of the group, and that everyone’s needs, while different, are equally important.

Gray (2009) proposes that the rules of hunter-gatherer societies, with their emphasis on sharing and fairness, are consistent with social play, and he suggests that humor and laughter are their primary means of keeping peace, resolving conflict,

correcting rule-violations, and maintaining egalitarianism. This is consistent with Lee's (1988) observation that:

There is a kind of rough good humor, putdowns, teasing, and sexual joking that one encounters throughout the foraging world. . . . People in these societies are fiercely egalitarian. They get outraged if somebody tries to. . . put on airs; they have evolved—independently, it would seem—very effective means for putting a stop to it. (p. 264)

Gray points out that in response to such humor, the person being criticized has the choice to join in with the laughter or express shame at their actions—either of which allow the individual to reintegrate into the social fabric of the group. Alternatively, he observes that individuals can continue to engage in the behavior for which they are being mocked, either until they choose to leave the group or decide to change the behavior. Gray suggests that this promotes a kind of autonomy not possible when the corrective social response to a transgression involves physical force, incarceration, or expulsion.

It is interesting to consider the parallels between Gray's description of these societies and Bowen's concept of differentiation of self, particularly in terms of the practice of connected-autonomy. Gray (2009) notes the ways in which playfulness can be found throughout the work, religious, and childcare practices of these groups, all of which contain elements that seem to reflect a high tolerance for individuality. For example, Gray describes hunter-gatherer religious ceremonies as having "more to do with embracing reality than with attempting to alter it" (p. 499). He notes that deities are seen as flawed beings with no authority over humans, and as characters to be mocked and teased rather than worshiped. Furthermore, he notes that different groups have different

religious practices and beliefs, but that there is no attempt to impose the dogma of one group or reject that of another group.

Gray (2009) states that hunter-gatherer societies extend the practice of respecting personal autonomy to their treatment of children. He observes that in hunter-gatherer societies adults do not attempt to control children by exerting power and that the wishes of children are generally indulged. After conducting a survey of ten researchers working in seven hunter-gatherer cultures, he found that children are generally free to play for as long as they wish, and that when they do contribute to the workload of the group, they do so playfully. However, despite finding that adults in hunter-gatherer societies rarely provide formal instruction, Gray notes that children freely choose to play at the adult activities specific to the group, and gradually develop the skills to become fully functional.

A final example of the interconnection between play and learning to manage interpersonal tension in hunter-gatherer societies, is Turnbull's (1982) description of how Mbuti children in the Congo learn to argue through play. Turnbull explains that the game may begin in response to a dispute between the adults in the group the night before. He describes how the children play out the argument as it originally occurred, and then—if the argument had not been adequately resolved—they attempt to resolve it themselves. Turnbull reports that if they are unable to find a way to reach a peaceful settlement of the matter, then “they revert to ridicule which they play out until they are all rolling on the ground in near hysterics. That happens to be the way many of the most potentially violent and dangerous disputes are settled in adult life” (p. 134).

*Origins of laughter in early humans.* Gervais and Wilson (2005) theorize that stimulus-driven laughter, which they propose is derived from the play vocalizations and facial expressions of our primate ancestors, became established in early hominids approximately 2-4 million years ago as “a medium for playful emotional contagion” (p. 395). They suggest that laughter would have served to connect the emotions of the group during brief periods of safety and satiation, and that the capacity to recognize and signal a fleeting period of security was adaptive for the whole group.

Gervais and Wilson explain this in terms of Frederickson’s (1998) theory that the experience of positive emotions in response to appropriate conditions would have been conducive to building physical, cognitive, and social resources. Thus, Gervais and Wilson point out that natural selection at the level of both the individual and the group would have established a propensity for laughter as an adaptive trait. They suggest that initially, physical forms of social play such as tickling would be the primary triggers for laughter. However, they propose that the process of natural selection gradually produced individuals and groups that were amused by a diverse range of nonserious social incongruity such as non-injurious accidents, flatulence, excretion, and sexual shenanigans.

It is possible to imagine how the early adaptive properties of laughter and playfulness, selected for in the process of evolution, were gradually co-opted to serve multiple other functions of human development such as learning, coping, and inventiveness. Simultaneously, it is clear that laughter and playfulness are strong social moderators that can function in the management of the processes of individuality and togetherness as they emerge in family and community relationships. As we gain more



clarity about how laughter and playfulness evolved, we can perhaps better understand their role in our relationships today. From a Bowen family systems perspective, gaining such perspective and understanding may be an important tool in becoming more thoughtful and less automatic about how we play.

### **Play and Therapy**

The first section of this chapter focused on our emerging understanding of the nature of play, with an emphasis on the evolution and function of play in non-human animals. The second section considered how humor and play may have evolved in our own species and eventually expanded to promote many aspects of individual development and social cohesion. This review is intended to ground the current study in an evolutionary biological context that is consistent with Bowen family systems theory. The ideas presented thus far, including the emerging theories about the role of play in anxiety management and emotional calibration, as well as the role of play in managing autonomy and cohesiveness in human relationship system, suggest that some aspects of play might be understood as manifestations of the emotional process described by Bowen.

From the perspective of Bowen family systems theory, play can be understood to function in the service of both togetherness and individuality. For example, when play is used to regulate the inherent stresses of social living, it can help to maintain the cohesion, stability, and unity of the group. With an understanding of the general pull towards togetherness proposed by Bowen (1992), we can predict that the predominance of play behaviors serve this function. Play experiences can also provide a means to develop more adaptive emotional responses to social situations—to produce individuals with the

increased capacity to function socially without overreacting or underreacting to stress. This may be happening over the course of millennia for a given species, or over the course of months or years for a particular individual. When systemic and individual reactivity is low, play can involve the unique and beautiful expression of an individual's life energy put forth into novel and creative endeavors. According to Bowen's concept of differentiation of self (1992), it is predictable that individuals with a higher level of differentiation will have more energy to spend in play even when anxiety in the group is high.

Therapy and clinical supervision can be highly anxious experiences for everyone involved. Thus, it is pertinent to ask how play shows up in these processes. What does it look like and what functions does it serve? The next section will outline some of the ways in which therapy and clinical supervision can be playful processes. After describing how play is incorporated into therapy and supervision from a variety of different theoretical approaches, the chapter will conclude by reviewing play as a component of therapy/supervision informed by Bowen family systems theory.

### **Play Therapy**

The majority of the literature on the relationship between play and therapy focuses on play as a form of therapy, which is generally labeled *play therapy*. The Association of Play Therapy (2008) defines play therapy as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.” (para 3.). Play therapy is distinct from

therapeutic play, in that play therapists utilize the therapeutic aspects of play but are guided in their thinking and behavior by specific theoretical models (O'Connor, 2000).

A wide variety of play therapy approaches have developed, each grounded in its own theoretical background. These include psychoanalytic play therapy, cognitive-behavioral play therapy, and humanistic play therapy (O'Connor, 2000). Family therapy models have also developed play therapy approaches (Gil, 2011), including Dynamic Family Play Therapy, Strategic Family Play Therapy (O'Connor & Braverman, 1997), and playful approaches to Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SBFT) (Berg & Steiner, 2003; Nims, 2011) and Narrative Therapy (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997). A meta-analysis of play therapy outcome research found a large positive effect on treatment outcomes across modality and theoretical schools of thought (Bratton & Ray, 2000).

### **Play therapy with children.**

*Children's play.* The majority of play therapy is conducted with children, and is grounded in the theories of childhood development established by Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Erikson (1963) recognized play as a means for preschool children to learn about their world and develop initiative. Piaget (1962) concluded that play was vital to the progress of children's intellectual and social development. He described play as a form of assimilation and accommodation, in which children integrate their life experiences into their pre-existing patterns of thinking and behavior. Vygotsky (1967), in contrast to Piaget, saw sociodramatic play as a primary driver of cognitive development, in which the child's thinking, constrained by its current context, could become free of these constraints.

Vygotsky (1967) also emphasized that children learn self-regulation through their participation in pretend play. According to his sociocultural theory (1934/1962) children's use of private speech—in which children talk to themselves, whether or not they are in a private or public setting—involves directing social speech inwardly as a way to guide and control their own behavior. He saw this process as a critical stage in the transition from external control to self-regulation. Krafft and Berk (1998) conducted a study based on Vygotsky's ideas, and found that more private speech occurred in play-oriented settings, especially when then this involved pretend play with fantasy characters. Bergen (2002) points out that the initial development of pretense and receptive and expressive language begins at around the same time, and questions whether this synchronicity represents a reciprocal or a cause-and-effect relationship. Lillard et al. (2013) found that there is still insufficient evidence to support causal claims about the importance of pretend play. It is interesting that the failure to find such evidence mirrors the lack of evidence of causal links between play and specific motor, social, or cognitive skills in non-human animals (Pellis & Pellis, 2013)

Another pioneer of developmental psychology, Jerome Kagan, makes the assumption that uncertainty is a major catalyst for action, and states, “children and adults seem to spend much of their time and energy in a narrow, psychological space bounded on the right by boredom with the familiar and on the left by terror of the bizarre” (Kagan, 1984, p. 72). This is consistent with a recent suggestion by Kestly (2018), based on the work of Porges (2011) and Fredrickson (2015), who suggests that play provides an opportunity to create resilience in the nervous system by learning to develop and manage

both high-arousal and low-arousal emotions at either end of the individual's window of tolerance.

A central tenet for many play therapists is the understanding that play is the language of children (e.g. Axline, 1947; Billington, 1972; Kottman, 2011; Landreth, Ray, & Bratton, 2009). This idea was famously articulated by Jean Piaget (1962), who said, "play provides the child with the live, dynamic, individual language indispensable for the expression of [the child's] subjective feelings for which collective language alone is inadequate," (p. 166) and by Haim Ginott (1960), who coined the phrase, "toys are the child's words and play is the child's language" (p. 243).

**Benefits.** Play therapy scholars have outlined many ways in which play has the potential to be therapeutically beneficial to children. O'Connor (2000) suggests that play fulfills the innate need to do something, that it allows a child to gain mastery of her environment and over conflict, and that it aids in skill development. Furthermore, he states that play is "one of the main vehicles through which the child practices and achieves separation/individuation from the primary caretaker" (p. 9). Schaefer (2011) proposes that play can help children express themselves, learn to regulate their emotions, improve their relationships, develop moral judgment, learn coping skills, prepare for life, and self actualize.

Homeyer and Morrison (2008) state that play provides a means for children to work through their reaction to traumatic events. They explain that trauma "often remains stuck in the nonverbal parts of the brain," (p. 211) and suggest that play provides a means to process trauma by moving stuck memories to the frontal lobes, where they can be thought through and processed. For example, they propose that play can help children to

play out a negative life experience in small chunks until the pieces have been assimilated in a way that is consistent with the child's view of himself, and the child has obtained a new level of mastery. They also believe that play can help children to learn more functional and adaptive responses to negative life experiences, and that this helps to weaken the stimulus anxiety connections associated with the child's original response to the experience.

Homeyer and Morrison (2008) also point out that different forms of play provide distinct opportunities for development. For example, symbolic play may help children to "express the unmanageable in manageable ways" (p. 213) such as a child talking about her father's anger through a dinosaur puppet. They suggest that it is the emotional distance offered within the context of play that allows children to communicate about such emotionally charged issues. Additionally, they propose that fantasy play can help children to increase their ability to regulate affect by playing out roles of power; that metaphorical play can help children to give meaning to their lives by shaping their belief systems; and that role-playing can help children to develop empathy by experiencing the world from another person's point of view.

**Goals.** O'Connor (2000) states that all play therapy shares a common goal: "the reestablishment of the child's ability to engage in play behavior as it is classically defined" (p. 87). However, the clinical goals of therapists are inseparable from the ontological paradigms within which they have developed their models of the world. Thus, how clients are assessed and outcomes measured is highly influenced by the therapist's theoretical orientation. The following examples illustrate how the potential benefits of play are used to different ends based on the model of the therapist.

*Psychoanalytic play therapy.* Psychoanalytic play therapy works towards the development of psychic structures and functions through the insight of the therapist (O'Connor, Lee, & Schaefer, 1983). Anna Freud, one of the founding psychoanalytic play therapy scholars and practitioners, used play as a way to entice children into therapy before shifting to traditional verbally-based psychoanalysis (O'Connor, 2000). In contrast, Mary Klein, another leading psychoanalytic play therapist and scholar, saw play as the child's natural medium of expression and used play as the mode of communication throughout analysis (O'Connor, 2000). According to O'Connor and Braverman (1997), the goal of psychoanalytic play therapy is the resolution of the "fixations, regressions. . . and developmental deficiencies and deviations" (p. 64) that have impaired the child's development, and play therapy provides a setting in which a child can express his intrapsychic issues, which are then interpreted by the psychoanalyst.

*Humanistic play therapy.* Humanistic play therapy models subscribe to the idea that children develop appropriately in suitable environments, and that symptoms occur in response to toxic environments that create poor self-esteem (O'Connor, 2000). Virginia Axline, an early and very influential humanist play therapist, based her non-directive model on the person-centered approach of Carl Rogers (Axline, 1947). She described, "a powerful force within each individual which strives continuously for complete self-realization. . . . a drive toward maturity, independence, and self-direction" (p. 10). Axline saw play therapy as an opportunity for children to grow and develop under optimum conditions. She believed that play therapy provided children with a way to express their feelings, face them, and either learn to control or abandon them. After achieving this

“emotional relaxation” (p. 10), Axline proposed that children could begin to mature as individuals in their own right, and ultimately to realize selfhood.

*Solution-focused play therapy.* SFBT is grounded in social constructionism and thus emphasizes the nature of experience as a phenomenon that is socially negotiated in the context of language (Klar & Berg, 1999). The SFBT approach involves setting specific goals based on the desires of the client, and remaining oriented to what works (De Shazer & Berg, 1997) through a detailed exploration of solutions and exceptions to the problem (Bannink, 2007). Solution-focused play therapy treats play as “the language through which children can find their own solutions” (Nims, 2011, p. 297). In this model, the therapist uses a variety of play forms such as puppets, sand tray, and art (Nims, 2007), to explore what the child wants, to look back at exceptions, and to look ahead to the child’s miracle (Nims, 2011). Berg and Steiner (2003) point out that solution-focused play therapy activities are “designed to enhance the children’s sense of competence, expression of their will, offering choices, and, most of all, giving them a sense of control over their environment” (p. 68).

**Play therapy with adults.** In recent decades play therapy practices and models have begun to be expanded for working with adults. Examples include play therapy with couples (Casado-Kehoe, Vanderbleek, & Thanasiu, 2007; Wiener & Cantor, 2003), with the elderly (Johnson, Smith, & James, 2003; Ledyard, 1999), and clients diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder who have child alters (Klein & Landreth, 2013). Frey (1993) proposes that the benefits of play may transcend age. Play therapy with adults can take many forms, including drama therapy (Landy, 2003), games, toys, puppets (Frey, 1994), and integrating humor (Sultanoff, 2003). According to Frey (1994) play therapy



with adults can be used to diagnose, enhance the therapeutic relationship, help clients who have difficulty verbalizing their concerns, relieve tension, and develop insight.

Ward-Wimmer (2003) states that play is important for adults because “it fosters numerous adaptive behaviors including creativity, role rehearsal, and mind/body integration” (p. 2). Frey’s (1993) research into play with adult populations found that play therapy enhanced creativity; fostered physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth; reduced psychological and emotional distance; and helped disorientated clients to develop an integrated sense of self. In her work with the elderly, Ledyard (1999) reported the observed outcomes of play therapy as “decreased depression, heighten self-esteem, improved socialization skills, and what appeared to be resolution of difficult issues” (p. 57).

**Family play therapy.** Many play therapy models, such as *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy*, *Filial Therapy*, and *Theraplay*, incorporate the child’s parents into therapy with the child (Gil, 2014). Research suggests that positive play therapy effects are greatest when parents are fully involved with their child’s treatment (Bratton & Ray, 2000). However, such models are generally parent-training approaches focused on improving the parent-child relationship, and are not grounded in family systems (Gil, 2014). In contrast, family play therapy involves the full integration of two distinct psychotherapy theories: play therapy and family systems (Gil, 2011).

Schaefer and Carey (1994) observe that in the past children were often excluded from family therapy for a variety of reasons such as their disruptiveness or difficulty expressing themselves, because of a desire to protect them from inappropriate topics, or because of the therapist’s desire for efficiency or adult-oriented theoretical orientation.

They also note that families were often kept from children's play therapy due to a belief that children needed their own space. However, Schaefer and Carey state that integration between the two fields became possible as ideas about pathology being centered either in the child or the parents shifted to a more systemic orientation.

*Benefits.* Botkin (2000) points out that the natural playfulness of children presents an opportunity for a family's dynamics to be reflected in play. Gil (2011) describes a case in which she invited a family to create a story using puppets. The family then devised a story involving a group of characters living in the woods next to a power plant that is endangering the lives of the woodland inhabitants. In the performing and unpacking of this story, the family eventually revealed a transgenerational pattern of agoraphobia that nobody outside the family knew about. The situation was a family secret that they had kept from many outsiders who had tried to intervene to help the family. Gil states that without her puppets the family may never have shared their struggle with her.

Family play therapists suggest that play can activate a family's creativity to explore solutions (Botkin, 2000), and that it can help to decrease resistance and help family members to see one another in a new light (Gil, 2011). Eaker (1986) reports that incorporating play into family therapy cushions the family's anxiety about secrets being revealed, and helps to gradually shift the family's perspective to a systems orientation with more possibility for connection between children and their caretakers. Gil (2011) describes her appreciation for the presence of play as "yet another tapestry of language in addition to structural dynamics, behavioral action, and verbal communication" (p. 224). She also states that family play therapy can serve as a bridge between adults and children

as well as between the conscious, deliberate, analytically-oriented left hemisphere of the brain, and the creative, symbolic-oriented right hemisphere.

*Attempts to integrate play therapy and Bowen family systems theory.*

Several clinicians have proposed ways of integrating play therapy activities into applications of Bowen family systems theory when working with children and families. However, in each case the clinicians involved do not have a strong background in Bowen family systems theory. Furthermore, the intentional involvement of children in therapy may reveal a misinterpretation of Bowen's ideas. For example, Nims and Duba (2011) describe a range of play therapy activities including art, sand tray, and puppets, that can be used to assess the emotional process of a family, give family members an opportunity to see one another's perspectives, and give the family members an opportunity to see and tangibly experience the emotional processes as they manifest in the play activities. An important component of the process is the videotaping of each activity, which can then be watched by the family, providing an opportunity for reflection and further processing.

Nims and Duba (2011) suggest, "little attention is paid to incorporating family systems work in a way that children can more easily understand the dynamics contributing to the overall family issues" (p. 89). However, Bowen (1992) describes some families as child-focused, and recommends not including children in therapy. He states that when seeing a child and parents together, although there may be good short-term results, there are difficulties in the long term. He states that his own approach is to "defocus the child as quickly as possible, to remove the child from the therapy sessions as early as possible, and to give technical priority to getting the focus on the relationship between the parents" (1992, p. 298).

Perez (2019) also describes integrating play into a family session for the purpose of assessing the family's level of functioning. However, he states, "it is important for the therapist to take opportunities to instruct and guide interactions that reflect an unhealthy level of differentiation" (p. 99). This belies a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of differentiation, and of one of the primary principles of the theory: focus on self. Finally, Gil (2014) describes her use of child-friendly family play genograms, in which family members select miniatures to represent thoughts and feelings about themselves and others. Gil writes, "the miniatures open the unconscious to allow metaphoric material to emerge" (2014, p. 14). Again, this suggests that Gil's goals for the therapy process are somewhat different to those of a therapist grounded in Bowen family systems theory.

### **Therapy as a Form of Play**

**A psychoanalytic perspective.** Whereas play therapists generally describe play as a tool to be utilized within therapy, some clinicians conceptualize therapy itself as a form of play. The pre-eminent British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott wrote extensively about the importance of play, which he believed was a natural and universal phenomenon (Winnicott, 1971). Rather than describing play as something that happens during psychotherapy, Winnicott thought of play as the basis of psychotherapy, and of psychoanalysis as a "highly specialized form of playing" (1971, p. 41). He stated:

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work

done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play. (p. 38)

Winnicott proposed that play may be the only way for people to be truly creative, and he emphasized that for psychotherapy to be done, the experience of play must be spontaneous (Winnicott, 1971). In order for this to take place, Gomez and Smart (2008) stress the importance of creating a secure frame and then managing this space, “so that the capacity to play can hopefully develop within it” (p. 151).

A number of other clinical theorists in the psychoanalytic tradition have expanded on Winnicott’s ideas about therapy as form of play. For example, Russell Meares (2005) describes the *field of play* as the place in which the sense of self is generated. He suggests that normal development is disrupted by a disturbance of this field, and that the task of therapy is to establish a field of play in which the self of the patient<sup>3</sup> can emerge (Meares, 2005). Meares (2001) points out that for the therapist, this involves an effort toward maintaining her own “aliveness” or “sense of self” (p. 766) despite the constraints of the intersubjective field.

Michael Parsons (1999) describes play as the “manifestation of a paradoxical reality,” (p. 876) in which something can be simultaneously real and not real. He states that paradox is the essential basis of play and also the interplay of psychoanalysis. Citing Klauber (1987), he points out that the therapeutic value of transference lies in accepting its paradoxical nature, and that the therapist needs to maintain and protect a *play frame* in such a way that the patient can learn to make use of it. According to Parsons (1999),

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<sup>3</sup> The words patient and client are used interchangeably, but reflect the original language of the theorist being quoted.

“when the unconscious manifestations of transference can be brought within the context of the play framework, which recognizes them as being real and not real at the same time. . . it becomes possible to work with them analytically” (p. 877).

Jean Sanville (1991) writes that much of the work of psychoanalysis “consists of building the playground in which playfulness can occur” (p. 2). She emphasizes the importance of creating a delineated space and time within which a kind of play can occur that is analogous to the social play of infancy. According to Sanville (1991), this context helps to liberate the spirit of playfulness and thus create the possibility for patients to re-author their life narratives. She describes her own transition from initially believing that the goal of therapy was to help patients become reality-oriented, to respecting the intrinsic ambiguity of subjective experience that is informed by each individual’s philosophy. For Sanville (1991), the realm of play thus provides a way to enjoyably negotiate the differences in perspective between the therapist and the patient.

**Terry Marks-Tarlow.** Terry Marks-Tarlow has a background in Gestalt Therapy and now focuses on interpersonal neurobiology. She has articulated numerous ways in which play underlies the therapeutic process (e.g. 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). For example, she describes the game playing that emerges at a deep structural level between therapist and patient, identifying hide-and-seek as the prototypical example, in which both therapist and patient negotiate how much to reveal (2015). She states that this process of engagement and disengagement may be indispensable to therapy because it helps people “to reorient in social space. . . while allowing us to engage in positive emotions and motivations” (2014a, p. 399). She suggests that therapy, at times, also resembles “strip poker, riding a merry-go-round, Russian roulette, theater improvisation,

and stacking and unstacking nested eggs” (2014a, p. 406), and proposes that conceptualizing a case in terms of the games being played can help therapists to better understand their relationships with their clients.

Marks-Tarlow (2014a) describes play as “the cornerstone of novel development during psychotherapy” (p. 399) and points out that play signals safety, which she describes as a necessary condition for novel modes of coping to emerge (Marks-Tarlow, 2012). She also notes that empirically validated clinical approaches are based on normative statistics and will not necessarily be effective in any context. Thus, for Marks-Tarlow (2014a), play is a key component of clinical intuition, which she describes as a solution to profound human complexity:

The more we clinicians—no matter what our level of training and clinical experience—allow our intuition to lead the way, the more we can relax into moment-to-moment states of being, feeling, and relating, even when the content of a session is anything but relaxing. (p. 406)

Freeman et al. (1997) argue that maintaining a playful approach helps therapists to think laterally, remain curious, and stay lighthearted.

### **Playful Therapists**

**Defining playfulness.** Although the majority of attempts to define playfulness have related to children (Lockwood & O’Connor, 2017) recent interest in adult playfulness has yielded a variety of attempts to define playfulness throughout adulthood. For example, Barnett (2007) created a definition of young adult playfulness based on the qualities identified in a study consisting of focus groups with 649 undergraduate students:

Playfulness is the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment. Individuals who have such a heightened predisposition are typically funny, humorous, spontaneous, unpredictable, impulsive, active, energetic, adventurous, sociable, outgoing, cheerful, and happy, and are likely to manifest playful behavior by joking, teasing, clowning, and acting silly. (Barnett, 2007, p. 955)

Barnett points out that playfulness is often described as the antithesis of seriousness, but that in tests designed to refine playfulness measures, seriousness has not consistently arisen as a descriptor.

Guitard et al. (2005) used grounded theory to define adult playfulness as “an internal predisposition characterized by creativity, curiosity, pleasure, sense of humor, and spontaneity” (p. 9). They state that playfulness emerges from the interaction between these components, but suggest that the individual components may not be of equal weight. Guitard et al. state that one interpretation of their findings suggests that playfulness enables adults to engage in activities with the same “openness of mind” (p. 19) with which a child experiences play, in which the beginning is known and the ending anticipated, but the unique evolution of the activity is discovered each time. They also suggest that playfulness enables adults “to obtain distance from self, others, situations, and conventions to approach situations with an open mind; to find original and novel solutions to problems; and to better face and accept difficulties, failure, and adversity” (p. 21).



Shen, Chick, and Zinn (2014) caution that when attempting to define play, researchers sometimes confuse the characteristics of playful people with the essential qualities of playfulness. In an extensive multimethod study involving focus groups, expert review, and empirical evaluation, they found considerable consensus around three characteristics: intrinsic motivation, freedom, and spontaneity. Shen Chick and Zinn point out that intrinsic motivation is likely the most frequently identified playfulness characteristic, and that the particular form of intrinsic motivation found in playfulness is fun seeking. They state that intrinsic motivation refers to what is sought within play, but that freedom relates to a lack of concern for the external consequences of the play. Thus, they suggest the sense of freedom in playfulness can be ruptured by intrusive and externally imposed parameters such as negative expectations or the expectation of punishment or humiliation.

Yarnal and Qian (2011) conducted a study on older adult playfulness based on Barnett's (2007) research into the playfulness characteristics of young adults. Based on their findings they created the following definition:

Playful older adults are happy, optimistic, cheerful, amusing, positive, enthusiastic, and relaxed. In everyday exchanges, they tend toward mischief, naughtiness, clowning, joking, and teasing; they embody fun and humor in ways that translate into laughter and amusement in others. Although impish, they are circumspect about their behavior in ways that teenagers have not yet mastered. Nevertheless, again, they continue to approach the world with a measure of creativity and whimsy.

Yarnal and Qian state that their findings suggest older adults' playfulness may be less disruptive than younger adults, which may indicate that older adults have learned "playfulness regulation" (p. 72). Yarnal and Qian describe this as the ability to increase or decrease playfulness in response to context.

**Research into therapist playfulness.** Research into adult playfulness has received relatively little attention (Proyer, 2017), and research into the playfulness of therapists seems to be almost non-existent. In a 2011 review spanning 120 years of psychoanalytic literature, Akhtar (2011) found only seven papers with the word "playfulness" in the title, only three of which referenced the playfulness of the analyst, and none of which involved actual research. In 1997 Schaefer and Greenberg (1997) created a scale for measuring the playfulness of adults, with the intention of exploring playfulness as an important variable in developing a therapeutic alliance. However, twenty years later Yonatan-Leus, Tishby, Shefler, and Wiseman (2018) found that therapist playfulness had never been studied empirically as a predictor of effectiveness.

Utilizing a version of Schaefer and Greenberg's scale, Yonatan-Leus et al. (2018) conducted a study that examined whether therapist's honesty, humor style, playfulness, and creativity predicted therapy outcomes. The results of the study indicated that playfulness, honesty, and creativity were not significant predictors of therapists' effectiveness. However, the results were mixed regarding humor styles. Whereas self-effacing, affiliative, and self-defeating humor styles were found to be insignificant predictors of therapists' effectiveness, an aggressive humor style was a significant negative predictor of symptom change. Yonatan-Leus et al. propose that this surprising result might be explained in reference to Leiman and Stiles (2001) concept of the

therapeutic zone of proximal development (TZPD). Leiman and Stiles postulate that clients' problem-solving capacities are limited by their efforts to avoid psychological pain, and that the TZPD represents the area in which therapists can assist their clients by intervening appropriately. Yonatan-Leus et al. (2018) suggest this requires an approach that is respectful of clients' defensiveness to psychological pain but also recognizes that effective treatment inevitably involves a certain amount of pain.

Lingiardi, Muzi, Tanzilli, and Carone (2018) conducted a study into the individual, cross-situational, and therapy–nonspecific variables that influence clinician effectiveness. The study involved an in-depth review of articles published between 1987 and 2017, which ultimately identified 30 relevant studies. They point out that the underlying factors of therapist effects have received little attention and that to the best of their knowledge “there has been no systematic review of empirical evidence on the influence of therapists' subjective characteristics on the outcome of psychodynamic treatments” (p. 86). The only playfulness research listed in the study are the playfulness scale developed by Schaefer and Greenberg (1997), and the study by Yonatan-Leus et al. (2018).

***Research into therapist humor.*** As described in the first section of this chapter, humor may have evolved as an advanced form of play fighting (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Humor as a type of play thus holds particular relevance for the current study due to the findings by Pellis and Pellis about the role of play fighting in anxiety management and emotional calibration. In a recent review of the research into play and playfulness, Proyer (2018) examined the proposed association between humor and playfulness and found

evidence for its existence. He based his work on McGhee's (1996) suggestion that humor is a variant of play involving the play with ideas.

The American Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor defines therapeutic humor as:

any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression, or appreciation of the absurdity of life's situation. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping. (Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, 2000)

Sultanoff (2013) points out that the many books and articles on humor and psychotherapy predominantly consist of anecdotes and clinical examples. Currently, research into the effects of therapist humor is extremely limited and has produced mixed results (Martin & Ford, 2018).

Nelson (2008) proposes that there is a reluctance to explore the role of humor in therapy due to the perceived potential risks. For example, Kubie (1971) warns that humor can mask hostility, offend the patient, entice the patient into compliance, and—as a form of self-disclosure—violate the neutrality of the relationship. However, there is substantial anecdotal evidence about the therapeutic usefulness of humor (Panichelli et al., 2018) and in the last twenty years researchers have begun to explore its effectiveness and influence on the therapeutic process.

A study into the effectiveness of humorous interventions utilized recordings of 85 therapy sessions at two university clinics (Killinger, 1987). Analysis of the recordings compared therapist-client interactions that included a humorous comment made by the

therapist, with randomly selected, non-humorous control interactions. A group of specialists rated the interactions, giving scores based on the degree to which the interactions stimulated client exploration and understanding. The findings showed that clients were significantly less likely to engage in exploration and understanding after comments that elicited laughter in the client.

Megdell (1984) studied the effects of therapist-initiated humor on clients in alcohol treatment centers. Both client and therapist were asked to review tapes of their sessions and rate their perceptions of the therapists' humor. The clients were also asked to rate their feelings toward the therapists throughout the sessions. Megdell found that when both the therapist and the client found the therapist's comment amusing, the clients reported being more attracted to the therapist, but not when only one person found the therapist's comment funny.

When Bedi, Davis, and Williams (2005) asked clients to identify which variables were important for establishing and maintaining a positive therapeutic alliance, humor was listed by some respondents. When reviewing the study, Nelson (2008) suggested that humor was sometimes used to regulate affect, and speculated that in such instances therapists might experience negative arousal in response to a client's distress, and thus use humor to regulate affect for both people.

Marci, Moran, and Orr (2004) explored the interpersonal role of laughter in therapy by measuring the skin conductivity of therapists and patients during therapy sessions. They found that laughter occurred twice every five minutes, and that the majority of the laughter involved clients laughing in response to their own comments. In contrast, only 10% of the therapists' laughter was in response to the therapists'

comments. Marci et al. (2004) provide possible explanations for these results, including the social-hierarchy implicit in the therapeutic relationship and the training of the therapist. They point out that their results are consistent with other findings (Coser, 1960) which support the idea that one function of humor is to communicate information about dominant versus submissive roles. They also suggest that therapists may suppress laughter as part of a general effort to minimize expressions of affect.

Changes in skin conductivity were significantly higher when both therapist and client laughed simultaneously compared to either laughing alone. However, therapists' skin conductivity scores increased significantly when clients laughed, irrespective of whether the therapist laughed. Marci et al. (2004) state that these results support ideas about the role of laughter in activating the autonomic nervous system (Fry, 2002) and the notion of "a sharing of biology" (Marci et al., 2004, p. 6). They suggest this illustrates the concept of physiologic rapport between therapists and patients. They also propose that their findings may be indicative of therapists' efforts to be empathetic without taking focus away from their clients.

Panichelli et al. (2018) conducted a study with the purpose of examining the association between humor and therapy outcomes. In the study clients and their therapists were asked to evaluate the frequency and intensity of humorous events, as well as therapy outcome measures including effectiveness, hope, and enjoyment of sessions. Panichelli et al. (2018) found a strong positive correlation between humor and therapy effectiveness from the perspective of both clients and therapists.

Kramen-Kahn and Hansen (1998) examined the interrelationships between the occupational hazards, rewards, and coping strategies of 208 psychotherapists. They found

that “maintain a sense of humor” (p. 132) was the most endorsed item in the category of career-sustaining behaviors. However, in a study by Townley (2015), the participants who reported the use of aggressive humor were primarily women aged 41-50, with less than six years of clinical experience, who were working part time. Townley proposed that financial instability and professional inexperience might increase stress, leading to the use of aggressive humor and gallows humor as “a misguided coping mechanism that is being employed as a means to provide distance between themselves and secondary trauma or an attempt to stave off feelings of burnout” (p. 44).

Interest in the role of humor in psychotherapy is growing, as indicated by the following dissertations published in the last two years. Dantzler (2017) looked for a difference in counseling student’s perceptions of supervisor humor styles, based on supervisee’s attachment security. She found no difference in perception regardless of whether the supervisees were securely or insecurely attached. Eberhardt (2017) studied the role of humor in addiction treatment and recovery, as perceived by addiction counselors. She found that humor was used therapeutically across the stages of change. Friedman (2017) conducted a phenomenological study into psychodynamic therapists’ experience of using humor with adolescents. He found that humor was used to create comfort and closeness, and to gain perspective. However, he also found that humor has the potential to be disruptive by unsettling the therapeutic rapport, minimizing clients’ feelings, and contributing to clients’ distancing or avoidance tendencies. Finally, Goodman (2018) investigated the interaction between humor and trauma, finding that the therapeutic effects of humor were most beneficial when there was an alignment between the depth of the therapeutic relationship and the quality of the humorous interaction.

### Play in Supervision

Bernard and Goodyear (2004) created a definition of clinical supervision that is widely accepted (Milne, 2007). They defined supervision as,

an intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative, extends over time, and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of the more junior person(s), monitoring the quality of professional services offered to the clients, she, he, or they see, and serving as a gatekeeper for those who are to enter the particular profession. (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004, p. 8)

Morgan and Sprenkle (2007) suggest that supervision is generally approached according to either a *developmental model* or a *social role model*. In a developmental model the supervisor's role is to facilitate optimal development through the universal stages of growth by recognizing and addressing the stage-based needs of their supervisees (Taibbi, 1990). The social role models are organized in terms of the supervisor's various functions and roles, such teacher, counselor, and consultant (Bernard, 1979).

A supervisor's approach and expectations are influenced by his or her theoretical orientation, the developmental phase of each supervisee, and the context in which the supervision takes place (Mullen, Luke, & Drewes, 2007). Lee and Everett (2004) suggest that for marriage and family therapists, the supervisor's role is "to help the supervisee become a more accurate observer of herself or himself and of the family," and to "increase his or her ability to control emotional reactivity to the family" (p. 59). However, research into systemic supervision has been fairly limited.



Breunlin, Lebow, and Buckley (2014) point out the challenges inherent in studying the complexity of the supervisory system, which is at the nexus of many intersecting relationships and contextual factors. Lesser (1984), speaking from a psychoanalytic perspective, suggests, “the supervisory room is crowded with all sorts of ‘persons’ who create anxieties for both the supervisor and the supervisee. It is often more crowded than the analytic one” (p. 148). Breunlin et al. suggest that research into systemic supervision is limited by the lack of funding opportunities, and they note that most studies have been conducted in university settings, which is not fully representative of the many settings in which supervision takes place. They caution readers to be careful when interpreting the results of existing studies until the findings can be confirmed by additional research.

### **Play Therapy Supervision**

The literature on play therapy supervision is largely conceptual, mostly consisting of recommendations, technique/intervention descriptions, and personal experiences (Donald, Culbreth, & Carter, 2015). Play therapy techniques are incorporated into supervision to enhance the supervisory relationship, increase the supervisee’s knowledge of play therapy techniques, and increase flexibility, playfulness, and creativity (Mullen et al., 2007). Mullen et al. (2007) state that in the right conditions of safety and permissiveness, play therapy activities “allow for a more childlike playfulness to emerge” (p. 73). Such conditions can engender more risk-taking (Crocker & Wroblewski, 1975), encourage and facilitate reflection, (Goodyear & Nelson, 1997) and help supervisees to become more self-aware (Westwood, 1994).

Mullen et al. (2007) point out that supervision is typically focused on verbal interaction. They propose that play therapy techniques provide a means for supervisees to articulate thoughts that are difficult for them to express, and to articulate experiences that cannot easily be communicated in words. Building on the idea that nonverbal behavior primarily communicates information about emotion and language (Kiesler, 1988), Mullen et al. suggest that the nonverbal, symbolic communication that takes place during play therapy activities may carry valuable information about the supervisor-supervisee relationship, and ultimately enhance their communication.

Examples of play therapy activities utilized in supervision include sand tray techniques (Gibbs & Green, 2008), body exploration and movement activities (Munns, 2008), drawing, letter writing, guided fantasy (Lahad, 2000), toys, music, poetry (Mullen et al., 2007), drawing, rituals, mask-work, collage, and puppets (Stewart & Echterling, 2008). Lahad (2000) describes an activity in which the supervisee is instructed to choose a fictional character to be her co-therapist. The supervisee is then asked to imagine that she is unable to make the next appointment with her client, and that her co-therapist—perhaps Edward Scissorhands or Princess Leia—conducts the session alone. The supervisee is then led through imaginary interviews with her client and co-therapist to find out what they learned.

### **Supervision as a Form of Play**

Winnicott's (1971) concept of therapy as a specialized form of play has inspired similar thinking about the supervision process for many supervisors. Recalling Winnicott's idea of a potential play space, Pedder (1986) suggests that supervision can be conceptualized as occurring in the overlap between the play of the therapist and the play

of the supervisor. This playful, co-created space provides a context that is intended to enhance supervisee's creativity, authenticity, curiosity and exploration (McDermott, 2005).

Slonim (2015) describes the quality of play in his supervision groups, stating that, Members are intensely concentrated, connected with each other, and spontaneous, in a way that resembles the dreamlike state that children enter when they are playing. . . . Content is of secondary importance, and a fluid back-and-forth occurs between talking about professional experiences and inner feelings using the shared language that develops in the group over time. (p. 58)

He suggests that the pressure to display clinical effectiveness is antithetical to the creative process, and that play helps to produce an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Referencing Youell's (2008) concept of play, Edwards (2010) suggests that playfulness in supervision refers to the freedom to think flexibly, take risks with ideas, and allow creativity to emerge. In reference to Winnicott's (1971) concept of therapy, he states that the creation of such a space requires that the supervisor facilitate "a holding environment analogous to maternal care" (p. 249), and that without this climate of trust, supervisees may be too anxious to share aspects of their experience that may produce shame or distress. Edwards points out that the regulatory structures within which therapists practice may restrict openness, stifle creativity, and produce controlling supervisory relationships. Furthermore, he suggests that the quality control function of supervision does not always complement the supervisory approach of learning through play.

Also building on Winnicott's (1971) ideas, Drisko (2000) describes the supervisory system as a "nursing triad" (p. 158) in which the supervisor holds the supervisee holding the client. He states that the supervisee eventually develops an internalized version of the supervisor, through which it is possible for him to share the patient's creativity. For Drisko, the establishment of this shared space allows therapists "to play with the clinical material to find empathic and effective interventions," and "to more easily avoid imposing their own perspectives on their clients, and more readily value the patient's own ideas, words and images" (p. 158).

### **Playful Supervisors**

Carroll (2009) conducted a cursory overview of supervision literature and found only one reference to creativity and none to humor. He notes that two major textbooks in the field of clinical supervision (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Falender & Shafranske, 2004) contained no references to either. Similarly, the author of this study has been unable to locate research into the playfulness of supervisors. In general, writing about playfulness in supervision seems to be limited mostly to the areas described above: play therapy supervision literature and psychoanalytic concepts of supervision grounded in Winnicott's (1971) concepts.

A review of the index of *The Complete Systemic Supervisor* (Todd & Storm, 2014) reveals that the index lists multiple items describing supervisor behaviors and qualities. These include humility, insight, cooperation, helpfulness v. intrusiveness, not knowing stance, self-confidence, self-monitoring, self-reflection, self-reflexivity, and transparency. However, neither playfulness nor humor is mentioned.

**Research into supervisor qualities.** As study into the preferred qualities of supervisors as judged by their supervisees, found that supervisees reported the best supervisory experiences occurred when supervisors were perceived to be friendly, warm, sociable, trustworthy, and having expertise (Anderson, Schlossberg, & Rigazio-DiGilio, 2000). The same study found that supervisees preferred straightforward feedback, accepting mistakes, and promoting experimentation. Carey, Williams, and Wells (1988) found that supervisees also rated supervisors highly for being mature and emotionally healthy.

Although the author was unable to find reference to any studies of supervisor playfulness, two studies included findings about supervisor humor. Worthington (1984) found that more seasoned supervisors used humor more frequently than those with less experience. He made no inferences from this data. Another study by Worthington and Roehlke (1979) found that supervisees' satisfaction with supervision was best predicted by behaviors that were indicative of a good relationship and to behaviors related to directly helping supervisees with skill development. The supervisors' use of humor seemed indicative of a good relationship, and was significantly correlated with supervisee satisfaction. Worthington and Roehlke also found that supervisor competence was best predicted by behaviors that encouraged supervisees to develop their own skills and behaviors that underscored experience and skill, such as using humor in sessions.

### **Playfulness in the Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship**

The supervisor-supervisee relationship is part of the foundation of effective supervisor practice (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004; Inman et al., 2014; Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2005). However, its centrality within a network of relationship systems makes

it hard to isolate and study (Breunlin et al., 2014). Research suggests that a theoretical match in the supervisor-supervisee relationship contributes to positive outcomes in supervision (Kennard, Stewart, & Gluck, 1987) and therapy (Steinhelber, Patterson, Cliffe, & Legoullon, 1984). Mullen et al. (2007), writing about play therapy supervision, suggest that although play therapy is not a theoretical orientation, that a “shared philosophy in the value of play” (p. 79) would exist between supervisor and supervisee, thus improving the relationship.

Many studies have examined the supervisory working alliance and explored how it relates to other supervisory processes (Inman et al., 2014). Findings suggest that a strong supervisory alliance improves supervisee satisfaction (Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, & Sato, 2009) and supervisee stress levels (Gnilka, Chang, & Dew, 2012). Other studies suggest that the working alliance is perceived more positively when supervisors and supervisees both have high levels of emotional intelligence (Cooper & Ng, 2009). Furthermore, Foster, Lichtenberg, and Peyton (2007) observed that supervisees exhibit similar attachment styles in their relationships with their supervisors as in their other close relationships, and that supervisees with insecure attachments to their supervisors perceived their professional development at a lower level than did their more securely attached peers.

This author was unable to find research into the presence or effects of playfulness in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. However, a recent study did explore the various uses of laughter in group supervision. Utilizing recordings of naturally occurring supervision groups, Hutchby and Dart (2019) found that laughter was a complex phenomenon with multiple functions. They identified three types of laughter, including

“laughter in re-assigning ‘problems’ to other parties; laughter in doing ‘being-in-charge’ of the supervision discourse; and laughter in the negotiation of ethically or relationally ‘tricky business’” (p. 1).

### **Playful Supervisees**

In the supervisory process, the supervisee contributes a great deal to the dynamics and development of the relationship. Bernard and Goodyear (2004) suggest, “each supervisee brings to supervision a rich blend of experience, insight, and habit that will affect supervision with or without the supervisor's knowledge” (p. 135). Norem, Magnuson, Wilcoxon, and Arbel (2006) conducted a study into the qualities of supervisees who demonstrate optimum benefit from supervision and whose growth surpasses other strong supervisees. They found that “stellar supervisees possessed... [a] combination of maturity, autonomy, perspicacity, motivation, self awareness, and openness to experience,” (p. 33) with maturity and autonomy emerging as foundational characteristics.

According to Norem et al. (2006) these supervisees were better able to manage their own anxiety and to “meet someone where they are. . . [rather] than have a preconceived notion where somebody ought to go” (p. 45). Thus, they are flexible rather than technique-oriented, and able to remain attuned to their own processes (Norem et al., 2006). Given the current study's interest in the function of playfulness as supervisees work toward differentiation, it is interesting to note the degree to which the attributes described by Norem et al. fit the description of differentiation.

Playfulness has been referred to as an important attribute for trainee therapists (e.g. Haley, 1987), and Edwards (2010) points out that many supervisees are too anxious

to play. However, there is barely any mention of playfulness in the research into the role and functioning of clinical supervisees. A study into the phases of professional development by Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) mentions playfulness and humor very briefly. They conducted a cross-sectional and longitudinal study of 100 counselors and therapists, and found that “there is little natural playfulness or sense of humor” (p. 15) in clinicians who are practicing in practicums, internships, or field placements towards the end of their training.

Rodenhauser, Rudisill, and Painter (1989) noted that for physicians there is “general agreement that personal qualities, attitudes, and values are more predictive of clinical performance than intellectual ability” (p. 372), and suggest that developing a list of ideal supervisee characteristics would be helpful for the psychiatric and psychotherapy professions. After surveying supervisors they constructed a list of 51 model supervisee attributes. Playfulness was not listed, but a number of characteristics related to playfulness were. These included openness, joy in personal life, social intelligence, interest/desire, motivation/initiative, enthusiasm/eagerness, sense of humor, collaboration, spontaneity, interpersonal curiosity, and enjoyment.

### **Play in Bowen Family Systems Theory Training**

#### **The Evolution of Bowen’s Theory and Clinical Approach**

Bowen’s reports during the NIMH Family Study Project include observations about the interconnected emotional systems of the staff and patient families involved in the project. In a 1956 project report he wrote:

The first problem was of helping the staff with training and with attaining enough emotional maturity to be able to make it possible for families with these intense



problems to continue to live together and to make it possible for staff to work with the families. (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 30)

Bowen recognized that it was extremely difficult for the staff to “stay neutral and supportive, without taking sides, and to stay out of the family differences,” because “it amounts to resisting a response to infantile helplessness with mothering and firm direction” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 33). He pointed out that for the patients who lacked close family relationships it was particularly difficult “for the therapist to be anything except an actual ‘one and only’ figure to the patient” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 49).

Comella (2006) describes Bowen’s rigorous research approach during the NIMH project, which gradually helped him to identify the emotional processes he was observing in both the research families and the staff. She explains that he created a “rule book” outlining what was then understood of schizophrenia, which Bowen used as an evolving frame of reference:

Whenever there was a discrepancy between the predictions embodied in the rule book and the outcomes observed, the researchers went back to determine if the fault lay in the rules or in their application. If the fault lay in the rule book, it was revised. . . . [and] as the research progressed, the frame of reference became more accurate (and more complete). (p. 137)

As Bowen’s concept of the family as an emotional unit developed, his ideas about the role of the psychotherapist changed and he formulated a new approach for his staff.

Butler (2013, p. 22) highlights Bowen’s first reference to the new role, which Bowen alluded to when writing about the development of the family group meetings that he

instituted in 1956: “as the group took on increased importance in the therapeutic effort, staff member roles moved away from the traditional roles” (Bowen, 1956, p. 4).

In July 1956 Bowen stated, “our greatest energy goes into preventing staff from trying to solve dilemmas” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 54), and noted “it requires great skill and training for a therapist to work successfully with these complicated intense relationships” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 46). After Bowen (Bowen & Butler, 2013), instituted patient-staff group meetings that were designed to keep tensions contained within the families and to avoid staff taking on parental roles, he observed increased functioning in both the families and the staff. He found that it was the first time that family anxiety could be reasonably contained within the group, and although “at times of high staff tensions, the family problems spill temporarily into the staff, this has been clinically manageable” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 52).

Bowen also focused on helping the staff to develop a different way of thinking about the family as a unit, which he stated took place on three levels of awareness: intellectual awareness, clinical awareness, and emotional awareness (Bowen, 1992). Bowen (1992) stated that although at the intellectual level it was a relatively easy concept to understand, it was extremely complex to apply clinically. To this end, he used the research designation of the project to institute a completely different language for referring to the families that avoided individualized diagnostic labels. Bowen observed that at the emotional level, new staff usually over identified with individual family members and blamed others. However, he observed that “gradually, there would come an emotional detachment from the stressful overinvolvements and a beginning capacity to become aware of the over-all family problem” (p. 74). After two years on the project, he

noted that when families were stuck on a problem, they were unable to resolve the problem “until the staff has discovered and solved a similar emotional immaturity within its own group” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 30)

### **Bowen’s Concept of the Role of the Therapist/Supervisor**

These records of Bowen’s original research findings give some indication of how he came to think about the role of the therapist, summarized here by Butler:

The family psychotherapist’s purpose is the analysis of intra-family relationships based on particular theoretical concepts. . . . It is critical to relate to the family unit and manage over-involvement with any one person. The family psychotherapist does not attempt to psychologically replace a parent, enhance a therapeutic alliance, or join the family. (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 168)

For Bowen (1992), each step of the therapeutic process should unfold automatically out of an understanding of theory. Speaking of his own work, he stated, “when I feel myself inwardly cheering the hero, or hating the villain in the family drama, or pulling for the family victim to assert himself, I consider it time for me to work on my own functioning” (Bowen & Butler, 2013, p. 116). As described in chapter one, this focus on self and on increasing one’s own functioning in relation to the emotional system of one’s family is the foundation of practice informed by Bowen family systems theory.

Friedman (2000a) states that for Bowen, the role of therapist and supervisor are the same, “not because the supervisor is a therapist, but because the therapist is doing supervision” (p. 13). He states that the dual focus of supervision is on teaching a specific way of thinking and on the differentiation of self. In his description of a supervision model based on Bowen family systems theory, Schur (2011) also states that there is no

distinction between the role of therapist and supervisor. He states that both are focused on coaching someone toward the same aim of developing more objectivity towards family and making choices to behave in ways that may increase differentiation of self.

Schur (2011) points out that the set of relationships intersecting in the supervisory process involve the members of at least three emotional systems: the client's family system, the supervisee's family system, and the supervisor's family system. He suggests that each individual in this relationship system is already equipped with habitual ways of managing anxiety, and that the task of the supervisor is "to maintain self in the emotional field in this set of relationships that comprise supervision" (2011, p. 282). Schur (2002) proposes that learning and growth for the supervisor comes from constantly monitoring self in the system, and that the more the supervisor can stay grounded in self, "the more he or she can follow the lead of the supervisee" (p. 407). He states that this effort toward differentiation "requires an openness to different ways of thinking and acting, while maintaining a consistency with self" (p. 415).

Bowen (1992) recognized that working on differentiation of self required great effort and was not for everyone, but he speculated, "the parental effort requires that the trainee more quickly accept responsibility for his own life. . . . [and] is more on his resources when he deals with the emotional reaction in his own family" (p. 519).

According to Bowen family systems theory, it also follows that this effort would also prepare trainees to be more emotionally responsible for self in the emotional systems of his clinical work. Writing of his approach to training family therapists, Bowen stated, "it requires hard work and dedication. It is not possible for a trainee to make progress until

he can contain his own emotional functioning sufficiently to *know* the difference between being inside or outside of an emotional system” (p. 519).

**Training at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family.** Papero (1988) describes the training program at the Georgetown University Family Center, which Bowen founded in 1975. He states that training is seen as “a person-to-person effort, with the instructor having as much to learn as the learner” (p. 71). This principle is echoed on the current website of the *Bowen Center for the Study of the Family*, which states,

Emphasis in all programs is on self-learning, but the separate roles of teacher and learner are not mutually exclusive. Progress toward a science of human behavior is a journey of discovery on the part of both teacher and learner to master the known and identify and explore the unknown about human emotional functioning. Significant learning takes place in a relationship process in which the interactions between teacher and learner drive the pursuit of knowledge and the communication of ideas.

Responsibility for learning rests upon each and the insights from Bowen theory guide the process of learning. (Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, n.d., p. para. 3)

Papero (1988) states that little use is made of role play and live supervision, based on the notion that such techniques are aimed at teaching people what to do, rather than helping people to think. He notes that the “major effort occurs outside the walls of the center,” in the trainees’ efforts toward differentiation in their own families (p. 72). Papero describes the focus of the training as working to clarify one’s role and “step beyond the inclination to change another person,” which gives the other person “the freedom and responsibility to find his or her own way” (p. 72). He emphasizes that the focus on the clinician—which applies equally to the supervisor—is always on the process of

differentiation, and not on technique. In clinical practice, differentiation can thus be seen as “learning for one’s self within the laboratory of the family” (p. 72).

Papero (1988) explains that every faculty-trainee relationship is different, and that the nature of the training varies in each case. He describes the teacher’s role as being to challenge the thinking of the trainee whilst also paying attention to the ways in which the trainee may be contributing to the trainer’s understanding. Papero notes that it can be extremely challenging to maintaining self clarity “in the face of the learner’s tendency to integrate quite different ideas and thoughts in an eclectic manner” (p. 74).

MacKay and Brown (2013) suggest that when a supervisor can refrain from functioning for the supervisee, the supervisor’s position of “not-knowing collaboration,” makes it less likely that the supervisee will “‘borrow’ thinking from the supervisor” (p. 330). In contrast, they point out that an anxious supervisor may contribute to an over/under-functioning dynamic in which the supervisee is less likely to develop thoughtfulness and personal agency. MacKay and Brown identify other ways in which a lack of differentiation can manifest in the supervisory process. For example, an emotional triangle may emerge in which the views of one supervisee are favored over those of another, or a supervisor and supervisee may enter into an alliance in an attempt to fix a client’s problems. MacKay and Brown state that when a supervisor can maintain a calm presence in the face of his supervisees’ anxiety “it allows for the richness of the supervisor’s experience and work on differentiation of self to be conveyed in such a way that enhances learning and models curiosity and management of anxiety under stress” (p. 335).

**Current training opportunities in Bowen family systems theory.** Many students encounter Bowen family systems theory in the coursework for their masters and doctoral training programs. The theory is frequently included as part of a class that gives an overview of multiple family therapy models, and may also be taught as a separate class dedicated to the theory. It is difficult to assess how many programs include Bowen family systems theory in their curriculum, how often it is taught as a separate class, and how often it is taught by an instructor with extensive training in the theory. Students may also be exposed to Bowen theory in their university clinics or practicum sites when supervision is provided by faculty members or supervisors whose practice is grounded in the theory of Bowen family systems theory. Again, it is difficult to assess how often this happens.

The lack of easily discoverable online information about graduate training programs suggests that there may not be a plethora of opportunities to receive expert instruction in Bowen family systems theory in university training programs. Furthermore, according to Lee and Everett (2004) 93% of supervisors do not use a family of origin supervision model. It is therefore possible that the vast majority of supervision, training, and professional development in Bowen family systems theory take place in the training programs offered by independent institutes.

This author was able to identify 19 centers and one online academy offering training in Bowen family systems theory (See Appendix A). Fifteen of the training centers are located in the United States; one is in Australia, two are in Canada, and another is in Hong Kong. The most common format involves a 7-9 month commitment to monthly one-day seminars that participants may choose to sign up for year after year.

Other formats include quarterly seminars, one-off seminars and presentations, clinical internships, and two/three-year training programs. Four of the programs offer certification. The trainings incorporate a variety of learning activities including lectures, interviews, and videos featuring experts in Bowen theory, including Murray Bowen. Participant presentations feature heavily and often focus on the presenters' own families. Other activities include attending conferences, discussion groups, and two programs offer neurofeedback. Coaching and consulting are offered either as part of the scheduled group meetings with other participants, or in between group sessions. Several programs emphasize the importance of self-learning.

The training programs describe a range of objectives that can be organized in the following categories (See Appendix B): 1) understanding Bowen family systems theory, 2) applying the theory in one's own life, 3) developing the capacity to define and manage self in relationship to others, and 4) developing one's own thinking based on the theory. Only four of the training programs used language to describe the experience of participating in the program, and three of them described their programs as stimulating. *Programs in Bowen Theory* (2018) located in California, describes the learning process in its program as "stimulating, open, and respectful" (para. 2). *The Bowen Center* (2018) in Georgetown refers to the "intellectually and emotionally stimulating experiences" (para. 8) involved in studying one's own family. *The Family Systems Institute* (2019) in Australia state that in their one-year introductory certificate program, they "aim to provide a stimulating, collaborative, learning platform" (para. 1). *The Learning Space* (2019), in Washington DC, states that their *Emergence of Self* seminar is a valuable opportunity for participants to present their best thinking, based on the assumption that



“having the opportunity to gather one's thoughts and to articulate [sic] them to others promotes increased clarity” (para. 2)

### **Playfulness in Bowen Family Systems Theory**

There seems to be very little evidence of an exploration of play through the lens of Bowen family systems theory. A review of the Bowen Center journal, *Family Systems* from 1994 to 2017 reveals only one article on the topic. This was a paper about a study that examined the play roles taken by pairs of dogs in long-term friendships (Smuts, 2013). Previous researchers had proposed that two playing dogs must show symmetry in their play roles (Bekoff, 2001). However, Smuts found this not to be the case in the dogs she studied. The findings of her study indicated that dog's play roles can be fluid over time, and that different dyads exhibit different role dynamics during play. Thus, she concluded that play roles are not a property of the individual, but the relationship out of which they emerge. She also stated that the variety of play roles observed all seemed to work in the different relational contexts, and therefore none seemed more optimal than another in terms of allowing play to continue over multiple years.

Panksepp and Farinelli (2015) contributed a chapter about the affective minds of human infants to the book, *The Family Emotional System* (Noone & Papero, 2015), in which they discuss the family dynamics that influence healthy mental growth versus decline. This chapter is grounded in the decades of research that led Jaak Panksepp to develop his theory of primary-process emotions (Panksepp, 2004; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). Panksepp argues that all mammalian brains share the same basic affective circuitry, comprised of at least seven primal systems in the subcortical regions of the

brain: SEEKING, LUST, FEAR, PANIC/GRIEF, RAGE, CARE, and PLAY<sup>4</sup> (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). According to Panksepp, this integrated affective network is evolutionarily ancient and represents the survival values that predict survival (Panksepp & Farinelli, 2015).

Panksepp and Biven (2012) utilizes Burghardt's (Burghardt, 2005) definition of play, and describes playfulness as something that is rooted in the PLAY circuitry of the subcortical regions of the brain, and which "extends to the farthest reaches of our imaginations in the stratosphere of our higher mental apparatus, to the point where we can tickle each other with jokes most clever and outrageous" (Panksepp & Biven, 2012, p. 352). Panksepp and Biven suggest that the play urge may exist to help young animals learn nonsocial skills such as foraging, social skills such as courting and competition, and higher functions related to managing more complex social dynamics. They state, "the brain's PLAY networks may help stitch individuals into the stratified social fabric that will be the staging ground for their lives" (p. 355). Panksepp's concept that mammals share the same emotional mechanisms for managing survival—and particularly social survival—is consistent with the Bowen family systems theory.

**Bowen at play.** Although the author has been unable to find other literature that uses Bowen family systems theory to investigate the nature of play, or studies that explore the function of play, playfulness, or humor in the therapeutic or supervisory systems, there are reasons to think that Bowen himself could be described as a playful clinician. Clinicians who were coached by Bowen can testify to the humor he used in

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<sup>4</sup> Panksepp (Panksepp & Biven, 2012) capitalizes these labels to distinguish them from other concepts of emotions and to indicate that they represent distinct, physical neural networks.

sessions (e.g., E. Gottlieb, personal communication, February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018). For example, Selden Illick described a conversation with Bowen in which she asked him what to do in a particular situation. According to Illick, Bowen stated, “You need to watch your own reactivity.” Selden reported that she replied, “If I did that I’d never say anything,” and Bowen replied, “That would be good!” Michael Kerr has confirmed that Bowen was very playful, and after describing play as “central,” he stated that playfulness is a way to communicate differentiation (M. Kerr, personal communication, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019).

As reported in Chapter One, Bowen (1992) referred to the importance of balancing humor and seriousness when working with clients. He stated:

There is usually a humorous or comical side to most serious situations. If I am too close, I can get caught in the seriousness of the situation. If I am too distant, I am not effectively in contact with them. The ‘right’ point for me is one between seriousness and humor, when I can make either a serious or a humorous response to facilitate the process in the family” (Bowen, 1992, p. 250)

This suggests that Bowen’s use of humor may have been a finely tuned aspect of the way in which he managed his own reactivity. There is another hint that this is the case in his description of his effort to differentiate himself in his own family. He stated, “If a person working on a triangle can stay less involved than the others, I think that is to be desired. In other words, I was able pretty much to laugh at my brother while he was shaking his finger at me” (Bowen, 1992, p. 525)

In an recorded interview with Michael Kerr, Bowen (1979) stated, “When you can be objective you can see the humorous side of human relationships. . . . When you’re out of it you can automatically do comments that let people know you’re out and people

respond very positively.” To give an example, he described a case in which he was seeing a terminally ill man and his wife. In a session that was becoming quite serious, Bowen stated that he found himself thinking that something ought to be done medically to help the man. Realizing that he was not worth much to this man if he was caught up in the emotional togetherness Bowen stated that he knew he needed to “get my head back into me.” He stated that after thinking it out, he asked the man what he was doing to help his wife adapt after he had died. Bowen stated that both the man and his wife both laughed, and that they went on to have one of their best sessions. Bowen attributed this to the fact that he was able to pull himself out of emotional fusion with the man. This had created the possibility for him to think for himself and speak from a place of neutrality.

In the same video Bowen (1979) referred to Carl Whittaker, and how Whittaker talked about having fun with a family. Bowen said that he did too, and stated, “Unless I can have some satisfaction or fun in it, or get some satisfaction out of it, I don’t do well.” Referring to his capacity to have fun with clients, he added:

Then I know that I’m outside of it. Whether they do well or not remains to be seen. I often tell people a real serious problem is ‘interesting’. The fact that I call it interesting takes it out of the intensity, the tragic aspects that they see. (1979)

He explained that when he described examples of such conversations to other clinicians, they “see it as smart-alecky,” but stated that the clients he worked with did not—as demonstrated in the case of the terminally ill man described above.

Recordings of Bowen’s trainings also provide examples of his playful style. For example, during a lecture to the Special Post Graduate Program meeting at the Bowen Center in Washington, DC Bowen (1987) described an incident in which none of his

trainees wanted to work with a particular patient, who had “an absolute genius for driving other people away from her” (2:25). Bowen stated that he made a speech, in which he asked if anyone was interested in science, and then said,

If you had to go to the skunk works, you would go as late in the morning as you could and you'd leave as early in the afternoon as you could. But if you had a motivation to find out what makes a skunk stink, the more the skunk stunk, the more staying power you would have. That woman had been out-skunking everybody! (4:04)

There was hearty laughter throughout, and a twinkle in Bowen’s eye to match.

**Others at play.** In this author’s experience, an appreciation for humor and playfulness have been abundant in her encounters with many of the people who study Bowen family systems theory, not least in their personal communication styles. For example, Walter Smith describes his approach as “curious, relaxed, humorous, teasing, challenging and suggestive” (W. H. Smith, personal communication, March 3, 2018). Speaking of her experience working with families, Victoria Harrison stated her belief that “the ability to be humorous and playful is built into the family and one person’s efforts will ignite that” (V. Harrison, personal communication, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

Referring to the relationship between play and an emotionally relaxed system, Eileen Gottlieb stated, “in a looser family there is a lot of play, a lot of laughter, but not with an anxious focus on somebody else. (e.g. E. Gottlieb, personal communication, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018). However, play can also be used to distance from others, which Kathleen Cauley explained when describing how her clinical experiences sometimes replicate those in her family, where humor was used to distance as an automatic response to anxiety (K. C. Cauley, personal communication, October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Finally, of course

the seeds for this study were sewn in the experiences of play with the author's doctoral supervisor, Chris Burnett, who has been the author's primary supervisor throughout her studies of Bowen family systems theory so far, and with whom she has laughed to the point of near collapse on many occasions.

### **Research Questions**

Bowen family systems theory explains human relationships as the manifestation of universal emotional processes that are rooted in the evolutionary biology of our ancestors (Kerr, 1998). Looked at through the lens of Bowen's theory, play behaviors can be seen as manifestations of those same emotional processes. Emerging research into the possible functions of play suggest that for many species it may have had an important role in anxiety management and in the development of emotional calibration (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). These characteristics indicate that play may have had a significant role in the evolution of increasingly complex social systems over millennia (Pellis & Pellis, 2013). Such questions are far beyond the space-time and scope of this study. However, they seem like an invitation to consider what role/s play might serve in the development of emotional self-regulation over the course of years or decades.

This study is intended as an initial exploratory step to investigate the relationship between play and the process of learning Bowen family systems theory. It has been the author's experience that play has functioned in many different ways throughout her learning process and in relationship to her supervisors, clients, and family. This study seeks to explore how other clinicians have experienced play, playfulness, and humor in their training experiences—particularly with their supervisors—and to use the lens of

Bowen family systems theory to consider how those experiences might be understood as manifestations of the emotional processes described by Bowen.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

The study of play, playfulness, and humor in therapy and supervision is fairly limited. The author was able to find only one study that directly assessed the playfulness of therapists (Yonatan-Leus et al., 2018), and none that addressed playfulness in the supervisory process. In contrast, although there may have been some reluctance to explore the role of humor in psychotherapy (Nelson, 2008), research into the humor of therapists is obviously a growing field of inquiry. The author found a number of studies that focused specifically on humor in therapy (e.g., Marci et al., 2004; Megdell, 1984; Panichelli et al., 2018), and others in which humor was mentioned as a finding of research into another area, such as coping strategies (Kramen-Kahn & Hansen, 1998).

Play, playfulness, and humor in the process of learning Bowen theory do not appear to have been topics of investigation in previous studies. Therefore, the current study serves as an initial exploration into relatively uncharted territory, aimed at elucidating some of the ways in which this process might be understood through the lens of Bowen family systems theory. It is intended to document a particular kind of experience, and to understand the meaning of these experiences to the people involved. Qualitative inquiry aims to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Thus, the qualitative approach is a particularly suitable method of inquiry for this study.

Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault (2015) state that the social sciences have been dominated by two theoretical perspectives: positivism—which seeks to understand the facts of social phenomena independently of subjective experience—and



phenomenology—which seeks to understand the subjective experience of social phenomena. Sinha (1963) suggests that from a phenomenological perspective, perception in general is considered a source of authority and should be considered an ultimate source of knowledge irrespective of theory. This may seem incompatible with Bowen’s belief that “research should be directed at making theoretical contact with other fields, rather than applying the scientific method to subjective human data” (Bowen, 1992, p. 340).

However, Taylor et al. (2015) point out that it is possible to utilize qualitative research to study a given phenomenon from a positivistic stance, and Denzin and Lincoln (2011)<sup>5</sup>, state:

Qualitative research embraces two tensions at the same time. On the one hand, it is drawn to broad, interpretive, postexperimental, postmodern, and critical sensibility. On the other hand, it is drawn to more narrowly defined positivist, postpositivist, humanistic, and naturalistic conceptions of human experience and its analysis. Furthermore, these traditions can be combined in the same project, bringing both postmodern and naturalistic. . . perspectives to bear. (p. 6)

The current study represents an example of such an intersection. It consists of an interpretive methodology focused on cataloging subjective experience, but these observations are intended to be in the service of developing naturalistic explanations rooted in evolutionary biology.

The focus of this study is to access the understanding of students of Bowen based on years of thoughtful self-reflection grounded in theory. As Michael Kerr stated at a

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<sup>5</sup> Paraphrasing Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg’s (1992) attempt to define cultural studies.

Bowen family systems conference in March 2019, to study Bowen family systems theory is to develop a way of thinking that ultimately becomes a way of being (M. Kerr, personal communication, March 2, 2019). Thus, the experience of learning to think in terms of family systems, and of embodying self and relationships within an epistemological framework based in family systems thinking, is the “participant’s personal world” to which the researcher is attempting to get close (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, p. 218).

This seems to be in keeping with the tradition of contributing personal case studies to the literature on Bowen family systems theory. In some cases, such studies present not only the functional facts of a multigenerational process, but also include reflections on the process of the individual recounting the case study (e.g., Comella, 2006). It is the author’s experience that such accounts provide a rich commentary that helps to elucidate not only the concepts of Bowen family systems theory, but also something about the nature and process of encountering, learning, and applying those concepts.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

The phenomenological approach has generated a variety of methodological approaches that can generally be categorized according to the philosophical traditions in which they are grounded (Tuffour, 2017). Descriptive phenomenology is based on the ideas of Edmund Husserl, whose focus was on the study of phenomena as they were experienced, and who saw his method as a way to grasp true meaning (Lavery, 2003). He sought to reveal descriptions of experience that were anchored in the data of the participants without regard to theory (Tuffour, 2017). Husserl therefore emphasized that

it was necessary for the researcher to suspend his assumptions about the subject of research in order to treat a thing purely as a phenomenon of consciousness for the sake of the inquiry (Klein & Westcott, 1994).

In contrast, the hermeneutic and interpretative approaches influenced by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, reject the idea that researchers can completely bracket their own perspectives, and researchers in these branches of phenomenology produce findings that are filtered through particular philosophical and theoretical lenses (Tuffour, 2017). Heidegger emphasized that the way a person understands the world is situated in the historical, social, and cultural contexts into which they were born and have lived (Lavery, 2003). Heidegger (1927/1962) suggested that to interpret is the inherent nature of being human, and that since personal opinion cannot be eliminated from one's interpretative influences, the researcher should strive to recognize and account for them (Lavery, 2003).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) seeks to integrate the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Tuffour, 2017). IPA embraces Husserl's aim of capturing participants' experiences by attempting to bracket the researcher's pre-existing knowledge about the phenomenon being researched, but it also accepts Heidegger's notion of interpretation as a fundamental quality of being, and thus requires that the researcher use her prior experiences and assumptions to make sense of the participants' described experiences (Tuffour, 2017). In other words, the participants' perspectives are central, but the author's interpretation is crucial in the effort to look for the meanings embedded in the participants' experiences (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of the research participants and to make sense of those descriptions in the wider theoretical context of Bowen family systems theory. IPA therefore provides an appropriate methodology that embraces both aspects of this process. Researchers using an IPA approach seek to examine how participants make sense of their “life world” and account for the events within that social context (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p. 53) However, they also recognize that access to participants’ perspectives both depends on and is complicated by the conceptions of the researcher as she engages in interpretation of the participants’ statements (Smith & Osborn, 2004).

This approach is consistent with the thinking of Walter Smith, who, at a Bowen family systems conference in 2018 stated that a scientific approach involves first observing the world and then comparing your observations to the current base of knowledge (W. Smith, personal communication, March 3, 2018). He challenged clinicians to give up seeing the world through theory and instead to begin with observations that can subsequently be examined to see how well they match up with Bowen’s theory. Smith suggested that rather than searching for Bowen’s concepts, clinicians should allow them to emerge from the clinical data. This invitation to begin with an intention of openness and curiosity regarding the particulars of a clinical case is highly consistent with the IPA methodology.

### **Research Design**

The aim of the study is to explore the relationship between play and the process of learning Bowen family systems theory. This involved conducting semi-structured interviews with therapists who have been trained in Bowen family systems theory. The

interviews explored how these clinicians have experienced play, playfulness, and humor in their training experiences. Although the concepts of Bowen family systems theory can be grasped intellectually fairly quickly, it can take much longer to understand, apply, and integrate the concepts at an emotional level (Bowen, 1992). Therefore, one of the selection criteria for the interviewees was people who have studied Bowen for three years or more.

The interviewees were invited not only to describe their experiences of play, but also to offer their own understandings of the function of play within these experiences. This created the potential for collecting multiple layers of data. At one level the interviewees provided descriptive data of their memories of what happened, including significant contextual information about the interviewees' family, academic, and/or professional settings. These are the "functional facts of relationships" (Bowen, 1992, p. 261): What happened, when, where, between who, and how. This is consistent with Bowen's research strategy, in which he sought to identify objective, measurable facts and to avoid cause-and-effect thinking.

At another level the interviewees provided data about their memories of how the interviewees thought and felt about the experiences at the time. Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) point out that an account can only reveal something about a person's current positioning or "mode-of-engagement with some specific aspect of the world" (p. 109). Accordingly, this description cannot be assumed to be an accurate representation of the interviewee's thinking in the past. However, there is value in learning how people think about their thinking at an earlier time. When writing the introduction to this study, the author reflected on what she remembered of her earlier training experiences. It was

her experience that through this process she was able to think with more clarity and perspective about some of her earlier perceptions, and that in some instances this revealed more about the meaning of her experience than if the data had only been collected at the time. Some of this richness emerged out of the dissonance generated in the simultaneous effort to give an accurate account of her experiences, whilst also considering the events from her current perspective.

A third layer of data, then, was derived from inviting the interviewees to reflect on their experiences from their current vantage point. Larkin et al. (2006) state that IPA focuses on how a particular person in a particular context understands their experiences in terms of their relationship to the phenomenon under investigation. The capacity to look at any given situation with greater clarity, perspective, and neutrality is a significant aspect of studying Bowen family systems theory. Thus, this layer of data is likely to reflect, to some degree, the emotional neutrality of the participants.

### **Sample and Demographics**

IPA studies typically involve a fairly small sample size because of the intensity and rigor with which each individual case is treated (Smith, 2011). Keeping the sample size low helps to reduce the possibility that “subtle inflections of meaning” (Collins & Nicolson, 2002, p. 626) will be lost in the process of analysis. Using a sample that is homogenous according to a set of important variables is another important factor in the sampling strategy. Selecting a closely defined group for whom the research question will be meaningful is therefore important (Smith & Osborn, 2004), and helps the researcher to better gauge the overall perspectives of the participants (Alase, 2017). Samples are

therefore selected purposefully in order to offer insight into a specific experience (Flowers, Larkin, & Smith, 2009), using methods such as letter-writing (Alase, 2017).

The sample size for this study was six psychotherapists who have studied Bowen family systems theory for at least three years. This training had to have involved supervision/consultation/coaching with a BFST-trained supervisor/consultant/coach at least six times a year. Participants for the study were found by reaching out to the members of a variety of Bowen family systems training programs. The author emailed a flier to faculty members to invite them and/or their students to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Due to the fact that the study of Bowen family systems theory is often a lifelong endeavor, it was expected that the participants would range in experience from relatively new clinicians to those who have studied the theory for decades. However, the people who responded to the invitation were all clinicians who had been studying Bowen family systems theory for at least 26 years.

### **Data Collection**

Participants who agreed to join the study were asked to review and sign an informed consent form prior to participation (see Appendix D). A copy of the signed form was given to each participant. Participants were told how to contact the author, the author's chair, and the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board, and invited to reach out at any time during the study if they had questions or concerns related to their participation. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E) including information about the participants' gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, clinical training, professional history, and current professional status. The questionnaire also included when and where

the student was introduced to Bowen family systems theory, how long they have studied, and the extent to which they have coached/trained/supervised others. Finally, participants were invited to submit a family diagram presenting the basic facts of three generations of their family of origin.

The most common data collection practice in IPA is the semi-structured interview, which offers a map for how the interview might progress, but gives enough flexibility for the conversation to unfold in unexpected ways (Chapman & Smith, 2002). Smith and Osborn (2004) point out that the IPA researcher is attempting to enter the world of the interviewee, and it is therefore beneficial to use an instrument that facilitates empathy, that allows the interviewee to contribute to the direction of the interview, and that produces richer detail. However, Smith and Osborn also note that semi-structured interviews take longer to complete and are harder to analyze, and therefore recommend creating an interview schedule in advance so that the researcher can think about what to cover and what difficulties might be encountered. They suggest that going through this process helps prepare the interviewer to be more focused on what the interviewee is actually saying.

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant, either in person, by phone, or online, depending on the location and preference of the interviewee. The interviews were scheduled to last up to 75 minutes. The in-person interviews took place in the interviewees' therapy offices. Due to the confidential nature of psychotherapy, these offices automatically provided a private setting for the interviews. The online interviews were conducted by Zoom, which offers end-to-end encryption of the online meetings conducted through their software (Zoom, 2019). The conversations



were recorded and transcribed on a Zoom audio recorder. The memory card containing the audio files was stored in a locked box in the author's home office. The files will be kept for 36 months after the completion of the study, at which time they will be deleted. The transcriptions of the interviews were kept on a flash drive that was also in the locked box in the author's home office.

Although the format of a conversation conducted through online video is different to meeting in person, Bowen family systems theory trainees are generally used to this form of communication because of the nature of the many training programs that utilize webinars, online interviews, and long-distance supervision/consultation. The fact that online conversations about theory and application of theory are such a regular feature of Bowen family systems theory training means that the discrepancy between the two forms of interview was likely to be less significant than for interviewees who have little experience with online conversations. In order to ensure that the participants whose interviews were conducted online have sufficient experience with online conversations, additional inclusion criteria for these interviewees were added. The invitation to participate in the study stated: Participants whose interviews are conducted via Zoom must have participated in at least six online conversations as part of their training.

The aim of the interviews was to explore the interviewees' experiences of play, playfulness, and humor while learning Bowen family systems theory. Given that students of the theory generally focus their efforts toward self-regulation in multiple spheres simultaneously, it was expected that the interviewees' responses would range across multiple relationship contexts. Furthermore, given the family-focus of the theory, it was likely that interviewees would tie experiences of their functioning in training back to the

emotional systems of their families-of-origin. The invitation to submit a family diagram was aimed at making any such conversations more efficient by removing the need for interviewees to spend time providing a basic outline. The interviews focused on four core questions:

- What is your general understanding/experience of play/playfulness/humor?
- What is your experience of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in your family of origin?
- What is your experience of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in your clinical training?
- What is your experience of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in your clinical work?

Further, follow-up prompts<sup>6</sup> were used to invite the interviewees to further reflect on their experiences, depending on how they answered the core questions. These prompts included:

- Their experiences of the presence or absence of play/playfulness/humor while learning Bowen family systems theory.
- Their experiences of play/playfulness/humor with their Bowenian coaches/supervisors.
- How these experiences developed over time.
- How their thinking about these experiences developed over time.

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix F contains a list of these follow-up prompts in question form.

- How they do/have experience/d play/playfulness/humor in other relationship contexts.
- The interaction between these relationship contexts.
- The function of play/playfulness/humor in their experiences.

### **Reflexivity**

Finlay (2002) suggests that the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research depends on researchers finding ways to examine the influence of subjective and intersubjective factors. She proposes that the practice of reflexivity, “an explicit, self-aware meta-analysis of the research process” (p. 531), can turn subjectivity from a problem to be managed into a valuable opportunity. She explains that reflexivity involves the continual effort to thoughtfully evaluate one’s own subjectivity throughout the research process.

In many ways, these skills are analogous to the effort to identify the manifestations of the emotional system and develop more thoughtful responses. Thus, the necessary effort to be aware of the author’s assumptions and biases is to some extent a continuation of a process that the author is engaged in by virtue of her work on differentiation of self. That being said, the author is fully aware that this effort is only incrementally effective. Thus, the inevitable degree of undifferentiation of the author made her vulnerable to engaging in conversations that are organized by pseudo-self.

Bowen (1992) states that pseudo-self is created and modified by the emotional pressure of the relationship system, and is oriented to conforming or adapting to the environment. In the context of research this could involve the interviewees offering opinions that are based less on their own thinking and more on the desire to

accommodate the needs of the author. For the interviewer, it could involve unconscious attempts to influence, impress, or ally with the interviewees—all of which would likely shape the data collection and subsequent analysis. It could also result in the author's fusion with the interviewees such that she loses the capacity to think critically and maintain emotional neutrality and a thoughtful perspective. Thus, it was important to set out explicit strategies for maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the process.

The author took the following steps in an effort to increase clarity about her own assumptions and how she was managing them throughout the research process:

- Creating an initial opinion statement (see Appendix G)
- Journaling
- Consulting with colleagues
- Practicing *shoshin* (beginner's mind)

The creation of an initial statement clarifying the author's opinions, assumptions, and beliefs about the nature of play/playfulness/humor in the process of learning Bowen family systems theory provided a gauge for assessing the degree to which these opinions emerged in the process of data collection and analysis. Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, and Poole (2004) suggest using a reflexive journal to facilitate decision-making throughout the research process. The author kept a research journal to track her thoughts and to re-examine her position in relation to the interviewees, her committee, and the hypothetical audience.

The author continued to consult with colleagues about how to manage the research process. This was extremely important during times of higher anxiety, in which the author's emotional reactivity to stress was more likely to compromise her

thoughtfulness. Finally, the author was mindful of the importance of maintaining a beginner's mind. To this end, she was best served by the positive experiences she has had in her clinical work when she has been able to manage the dichotomy of simultaneously developing expertise in a theoretical framework, whilst also seeking to observe and learn without preconceptions. It is worth noting that such moments are often, for the author, playful experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of analysis in IPA generally aims to move from the descriptive to the interpretative (Brocki & Wearden, 2006), and between an emic and an etic perspective (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), but it does not conform to a particular prescriptive procedure. Thus, researchers are encouraged to treat the common practices of IPA analysis as a flexible guideline, and to be creative about how they are used (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Smith and Osborn (2004) note that during analysis, the task of the researcher is to capture the meanings of the interviewees, which may not be transparent. Therefore, they suggest that the interpretative process requires sustained engagement with the transcripts. Many IPA researchers make reference to the outline provided by Smith et al. (1999), which provides a detailed account of the analysis process. The author utilized a slightly modified version of this outline.

The theoretical lens used to analyze the transcripts integrates Bowen family systems theory and evolutionary biological theories about the development and function of play. These theories seem to support the notion that playfulness and humor are manifestations of the emotional process, and that they serve multiple functions in the management of anxiety related to survival within the interdependent social context of

mammalian life. The author's theoretical lens is also shaped by the literature on play, playfulness, and humor in the processes of therapy and supervision. It is assumed that anxiety management is an essential component of the learning process, and that play, playfulness, and humor function in the service of anxiety management with different short and long term consequences. As the author progressed through the following steps she used this lens to interpret the data, whilst simultaneously maintaining a commitment to the reflexive stance outlined above. She thus endeavored to maintain a both/and perspective in which theory is held lightly alongside curiosity and openness.

**Step one: Looking for themes.** The first stage involved closely reading and re-reading one of the transcripts. During this process the author highlighted anything in the text that stood out as interesting or significant. Using the review function of Microsoft Word, she took note of accompanying thoughts about these sections in the margin of the document. These comments consisted of summaries, connections, and/or preliminary interpretations (Smith et al., 1999), including aspects of the data that echoed information introduced during the literature review. The author made a note of the type of comment being made and provided page numbers for comments that referred to any relevant references from chapter two. After repeating this process several times, and at the point that the author could read the text without noticing new sections to highlight and annotate, the author made note of potential abstract themes revealed by the first stage of analysis. She also recorded these themes in the margin of the document using the Microsoft Review function.

**Step two: Defining the relationship between themes.** The next stage involved organizing the initial list of themes. All the themes were extracted from the original

document and listed in a new one. The author then rearranged the list according to which themes could be clustered together and how the individual themes and clusters could be hierarchically arranged into superordinate themes and subordinate themes. Throughout this process the author referred back to the transcript to ensure that the new arrangement of themes had not distorted their relationship to the original text (Smith et al., 1999). The aim was to begin discovering the primary meanings that the interviewee had articulated.

**Step three: Repeating with other interviews.** IPA is considered to be fundamentally ideographic due to the degree of detailed analysis that occurs with each interview before moving on to the next (Tuffour, 2017). The first two steps were repeated for every interview. Smith et al. (1999) note that it is possible at this stage to use the first list as a foundation that is added to and amended. They point out the importance of looking at each interview with fresh eyes, but also note the inevitability that when examining later transcripts the researcher will be primed to aspects of the data already discovered.

The author originally intended to start a fresh list for each interview as a way of maintaining beginner's mind. However, the author recognized that in her initial arranging of the data, her knowledge of the data from the other interviews was already influencing her choices. For example, although the first interviewee only directly mentioned the theme of absurdity a couple of times, the author knew that it had come up repeatedly in other interviews, and this drew her attention to ways in which the first interview addressed absurdity indirectly. It therefore seemed more suitable to use the first list as a foundation for the rest of the process, knowing that the other interviews were influencing what she paid attention to and making efforts to be open-minded and detailed in her

examination of the text. Furthermore, the author heavily utilized the fact that IPA analysis is a cyclical process (Smith et al., 1999), and as the analysis continued, the identification of new themes in subsequent interviews frequently changed the author's understanding of earlier themes, in which case she made modifications. The author found that she was able to return to the interviews at each stage of the process and find new meaning in them.

**Step four: Creating a master list.** When the first three steps of the process had been completed with every interview, the author was left with a master list containing all the themes. At this stage the list included 30 themes, with accompanying notes that listed every excerpt that reflected the theme. Some of the transcript excerpts applied to multiple themes, and so were listed multiple times. In order for this list to be useful, the author began to arrange and filter it according to which themes best represented the data. This involved prioritizing themes that were attached to particularly rich passages of text and because of a theme's capacity to elucidate other aspects of the data (Smith & Osborn, 2004). In order to organize the themes in terms of hierarchy, the author continued to re-read sections of the transcripts in order to understand the relationship between the themes and how to arrange them to best reflect the meaning that emerged from the data. This required the author to pay attention both to the meanings that emerged from zooming out to get a bird's eye view on the collective data from all the interviews, as well as to zoom in to focus on the meaning of each individual interviewee.

**Step five: Identifying and analyzing processes.** During the first three stages of analysis, the author began a separate list of the interviewee's descriptions of processes related to play. This list was created as a way of tracking the interaction between different



themes, and the directionality of the relationship between play and the themes. A process was defined as any series of behaviors or experiences that seemed to contribute to the conditions within which play emerged, or that seemed to emerge out of a condition to which play had contributed. Each process was broken down into its essential constituent parts, and the relationship between those parts was indicated with the use of the following symbols: >, +, /. These symbols respectively indicate: ‘contributed to’, ‘in addition to’, and ‘or’.

The following example illustrates how a process was derived from the text and annotated in the list:

*Transcript excerpt:*

Researcher: How do you think that your playfulness and humor contributes to the learning of your students?

Interviewee: Well my impression is that it’s really helpful. I think they are able to take themselves less seriously while at the same time taking what they’re trying to get done more seriously. In other words I think it creates some room to calm down about yourself; to calm down about whatever the circumstances may be, and yet to continue to be very thoughtful in trying to figure some things out.

*Processes derived from transcript*

- Playfulness of supervisor > helps supervisees to take themselves less seriously + take effort seriously > supervisees calm down
- Playfulness/humor > creates room for calming down + being thoughtful

After the list was completed, the author identified which themes were evident in the processes (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Example of processes and themes*

Playfulness/humor > creates room for calming down + being thoughtful (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
Playfulness of supervisor > helps supervisees to take themselves less seriously + take effort seriously > supervisees calm down (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>

*Note.* The theme, “Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously” is represented by the text, “Taking \* less seriously.”

Finally the author analyzed the list of themes to identify how they could be sorted into categories. This entailed printing out the complete list of processes, cutting them into strips, and trying different ways of grouping the themes until they were organized in a way that seemed cohesive, logical, and clustered hierarchically in a way that reflected the more general, fundamental nature of the processes as well as their more specific qualities.

**Step six: Auditing the master lists.** Larkin and Thompson (2012) point out that *member checking* may be less appropriate for an IPA research design than some other forms of qualitative research. They state that in IPA, member checking can actually be counterproductive because the results of the analysis involve the amalgamation of multiple participants, and the interpretations of the researcher. Instead, Larkin and Thompson offer alternative means to validate the coherence and plausibility of the analysis, including sample validation, peer validation, and audit. The author used a table developed by Larkin and Thompson (p. 113) to demonstrate exactly how the themes emerged from the text of the interviews (see Appendix H). This form was completed for each of the themes and used in an audit with the author’s supervisor.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggest that measuring the recurrence of themes across cases can help to enhance the validity of findings involving larger groups. They state that there is no rule about the rate of occurrence necessary to demonstrate

validity, because it depends on the intention of the research project. For this study, the author decided that each superordinate theme should be present for at least 75% of the participants, that each subordinate theme and process category should be present for at least 50% of the participants. This was measured by identifying and counting which interviewees had contributed to each theme and process category. Finally, the author created a table that demonstrated the internal coherence of the themes in relation to the category processes, by listing them in relation to each other (see Table 7).

**Step seven: Preparing the report.** In IPA methodology analysis continues during the process of reporting on the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2004). In order to prepare the report, the author created a new document for each theme, and copied and pasted each theme list from the master list. Then the author copied the specific excerpts from the transcripts onto the separate theme document, and further arranged the transcript excerpts according to their relationship to one another, in order to present a clear and understandable narrative. This process gave the author yet another opportunity to reflect on the themes and their relationship to one another, which prompted a final reorganization.

When the author began writing the report she still had six superordinate themes. By going through the process of sorting the excerpts to best represent these themes, the author experienced greater understanding of the relationship between the themes, and made a decision to reduce the subordinate themes to five by changing one of them to a subordinate theme. The cyclical approach described throughout the seven stages of analysis was essential to ensure that the author's interpretation of the data was grounded in the meaning that emerged from the interviews rather than the author's preconceptions.

The final report presents the themes and processes that emerged during the analysis, illustrated by excerpts from the interviews.

### **Self of the Researcher**

IPA methodology was selected for the study because it offered a way for the author to bracket her pre-existing knowledge, experiences, and assumptions while attempting to capture the participants' experiences and how they made sense of them, and then to utilize the author's lens in order to make sense of the participants' described experiences. This involved creating an initial opinion statement that could be compared to the findings, journaling throughout the process, consulting with colleagues, and practicing beginner's mind.

The author's ongoing efforts to work on differentiation of self contributed to her ability to manage her reactivity throughout the entire study. The author's continual attempt was to place the pursuit of knowledge and understanding above the impulses that were generated in response to the emotional systems within which she was embedded, including family, academia, and the Bowen community. To this end, the analysis and reporting of the interviews involved a rigorous process that required the author to repeatedly return to the data in order to verify that the coding, sorting, and presentation of the data had not distorted the meaning of the participants such that it no longer represented their experiences or thoughts. Throughout this technical process the author endeavored to observe and manage her emotional process responsibly.

**The researcher's process.** At the outset of the study the author became aware of a flood of emotions and thoughts about the upcoming interviews. She wrote a journal entry at the time with the intention of getting clear about the nature of her reactivity, and

to try to gain clarity about her thoughts and beliefs based on consciously developed principles. This is a practice that she had previously found useful at times of stress and uncertainty when she wanted to base her actions on thoughtfully determined principles rather than immediate reactions aimed at relieving discomfort. The following excerpts from this journal entry capture some of the emotions she was experiencing:

I have observed a variety of emotions about the research process, including:

- Excitement about the prospect of collecting meaningful data that might provide useful information that will in some small way contribute to the growing knowledge-base associated with Bowen theory.
- A sense of validation about being a researcher, belonging to a community of scholars and participating actively in the ‘Bowen community.’
- Anxiety about my capabilities as an interviewer and researcher.
- Worry that I might not hear anything ‘unexpected in the interviews.... that I may not expand on what I’ve already covered.

In these reactions I see the process of togetherness writ large, and the effort to differentiate threaded throughout.

After expressing these feelings and concerns, I then wrote about my intentions and understanding as I approached the interviews:

- Anxiety is to be expected and warrants paying attention to because it tends to provoke automatic reactions. These automatic reactions are often in response to experiencing a threat, and involve the ancient emotional circuitry of the brain. These processes often involve issues that are bound up with unresolved emotional attachment. They often trigger a need for attention, approval, and reactivity to

other people's expectations. Knowing this creates the opportunity to make a different choice ... [seeing this] helps to predict potential reactivity and to identify habitual patterns.... Getting realistic about myself as a researcher will help to limit my reactivity to expectations [and] my fears of failure. Getting realistic involves being calm enough to accept one's humanity and limitations without anxiety spiking so high that functioning is reduced, AND being calm enough to be able to accept one's potential without anxiety spiking so high at the idea of the responsibility that functioning is reduced.

- Today read Kerr's (2019) observation that the underfunctioning person in a relationship "is freed from the anxiety of responsibility and decision making" (p. 52). Recognizing this in my own life and taking steps to act in accordance with my long-term goals for independence, thriving, and respectful, connected relationships.
- Thus, as I notice myself relating to my potential interviewees from the position of LITTLE GIRL, I recognize that this limits my intellectual capacity, my thoughtful and unique contribution to the interaction, and my own efforts toward future thriving.

The author continued journaling throughout the interview and analysis process as part of the effort to be self-observant, to maintain objectivity, to hold herself accountable to her intentions, and to document the process. The following excerpts illustrate some of her reflections after the first few interviews:

- I loved the experience of my attention being drawn to new things, such as humor as a facet of over-functioning/under-functioning.

- At the end I asked what the interviewee might be thinking about that I hadn't asked.... This question elicited really interesting answers that were off my radar.
- I have learned a lot, especially about how to get out of the areas I'm expecting ... and allowing the conversation to flow. Sometimes I felt detached from the conversation and I'm sure I missed a lot of chances to go into some really interesting details.

As the interviews continued the nature of the research process began to emerge:

- Things he was saying popped out as if a light was shining on them: theme, theme, theme. I see now how the analysis is already taking place as I pay attention to the specific things that stand out to me as I listen.
- Thinking about how each interview becomes the context in which the future interviews take place.

Having naively anticipated that analysis wouldn't start until the interviews were completed and transcribed, the author was surprised to realize that it was an ongoing reflexive process. Recognizing this meant that she was better able to pay attention to the subjectivity involved in this process:

Thinking about the way the later interviews are shaped by the former.... Thinking about how to use my own knowledge, experiences, and ideas to inform questions without 'funneling' the interviews. The open-mindedness and generality of the main questions helps with this, but 'digging in' and following up on details of the initial answers cannot but be informed by pre-conceptions.... Certain things jump into the forefront and others remain background. This is less about making a choice to ignore them, than the natural act of perception in which they remain out

of focus.

A journal entry that the author made after completing the fourth interview sheds light on how her awareness of the process may have developed and shaped her interview process:

Transcribing interview #3 and surprised by finding statements that really echo my own experiences as described in chapter 1. I don't remember hearing this and wonder if I *heard* it at the time. In the middle of the second interview I was conscious that I may have gotten too far into looking for a specific experience ... and wanted to avoid being leading or to be in a frame of mind to look for anything specific.

Having completed the interviews and transcription, the author began the post-transcription analysis, and throughout this stage she marveled at the effectiveness of the cyclical IPA analysis process, which helped her to keep mining the data and discovering more every time she returned to the transcripts:

There really is a swing between etic and emic. I read that earlier and questioned it, thinking it was a one-way swing *from* one to another, but it's really *swinging back and forth from one to another*. That's important. The effort to describe, summarize, and attempt to get clear about what the interviewee *means* triggers thoughts about how these meanings are connected to the pre-existing ideas of the researcher and the researcher's understanding of the pre-existing literature. After following these connections, it is then necessary to go back and set them aside to try to draw out the meaning again without imposing the researcher's assumptions. The reflective process was also vital for guarding against assumptions building up



in the earlier stages of analysis such that they limited what could be learned in the later stages:

Conscious of the importance of cycling between efforts toward beginner's mind and interpretation/filtering based on existing knowledge/assumptions, and trying to be aware of the omnipotence and 'insidiousness' of those assumptions.

Confirmation bias. The greater danger with the later interviews is to fit them into what I've already shaped, so trying to be vigilant about approaching them with openness to new ideas and allowing them to shape the existing ideas (categories, themes, organization etc.)

As the author approached the end of the analysis before writing the report, there was a moment at which all the data suddenly seemed to take meaningful shape:

Something has clicked this afternoon. I went from a list of about 30 themes and sections, to a list of 6 themes with sub-themes.... The process required getting very clear about the relationship between each element, understanding how they were hierarchically arranged, and repeatedly checking back to the transcripts to make sure that I was staying true to the original meaning ... as it was expressed by the interviewee. Afterwards I had a sense of clarity, as if I had finally drawn something out of the transcripts; that the weighting and arrangement of the themes is bringing to light the information and meaning that lies in the knowledge and experience of the interviewees.

During the writing of the report the analysis continued, such that the author was constantly refining her organization of what had been expressed and cross-checking her interpretation with the original data. Just before completing the report it seemed

appropriate to finally go back and read the initial opinion statement that she had written prior to beginning the research. Doing so revealed that while the findings of the study did not contradict her previous ideas, they had contributed tremendous richness to her prior understanding. It was akin to walking through a forest alone, and then being taken on a tour by six different experts who point out aspects of the trees, the insects, the undergrowth, the seasons, the history of the forest, and the interplay between all of the above. It has been tremendously educational and a great pleasure to have undertaken these journeys. The author's sincere hope is that she has used the IPA process:

1. To accurately represent the experiences and thoughts of the interviewees, and
2. To filter the data through her own lens in such a way that the reported findings are a meaningful and useful exploration of the topic.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Participants

The study included six participants with extensive experience studying Bowen family systems theory. Each participant had experienced supervision from the vantage point of a trainee and also as a supervisor/coach. The following table provides general information about the range of ages, academic backgrounds, professional history, and training experiences of the individuals included in the study. Due to the relatively small nature of the Bowen community, the demographic details are provided as ranges in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

Table 2: *Demographic range of participants*

Age	Between 55-80 years old
Average age	71 years old
Ethnicity	White and African American
Level of education	Four masters level and two doctoral level degrees
Clinical training	Family therapy, social work, psychology, and psychiatry
Professional history	Private practice therapist, clinical director, executive director, university lecturer, and consultant (individuals had held multiple positions)
Introduction to Bowen family systems theory	Postgraduate training programs, masters program, supervisor of field placement during masters program, consulting with a therapist informed by Bowen family systems theory, and medical training
Length of time studying Bowen family systems theory	26 years to 50+ years
Average length of time studying Bowen family systems theory	37 years
Length of time coaching/supervising other clinicians	10 years to 40+ years
Average length of time coaching/supervising other clinicians	27 years

## **Results**

During the data analysis, five superordinate themes and nine subordinate themes emerged (see Table 3). Additionally, three superordinate and 12 subordinate categories of processes emerged, which provided information about the interrelationship between play and humor and the five superordinate themes. The themes and processes that emerged during the analysis describe the participants' experiences and observations related to playfulness and humor in general, and can be applied to any relationship context. Therefore, the themes and processes are presented first, followed by a summary of the participants' experiences of play and humor in their supervisory systems.

### **Themes**

Table 3 shows the five superordinate themes and nine subordinate themes that emerged from the data analysis. The first theme, neutral objectivity, incorporates the participants' observations about the relationship between play/humor and the development of increased neutrality and objectivity. This includes the idea that getting more neutral and more objective can create room for playfulness and humor, as well as the idea that humor and playfulness can facilitate the development of neutrality and objectivity. Within this theme, acceptance emerged as a subordinate theme, which seemed to describe an important variable in these processes.

The second theme is not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously, which focuses primarily on the benefits of being able to laugh at oneself. This theme includes three subordinate themes: absurdity, seriousness, and looseness. The participants described absurdity in terms of the usefulness of recognizing, accepting, and laughing at

Table 3: *Superordinate and subordinate themes*

<b>Superordinate theme</b>	<b>Subordinate themes</b>
Neutral objectivity	Acceptance
Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously	Absurdity Looseness Seriousness
Emotional climate/circuit	Learning
Emotional distance	Emotional Closeness Emotional Separateness
Changing perspective	Shift in emotion Shift in thinking

the inherent absurdity of human life. The participants used the term looseness to describe becoming less uptight or rigid about something. The third subordinate theme deals with the nuances related to seriousness reported by the participants, including contextual factors that tend to promote seriousness.

The third theme, emotional climate/circuit, describes the participants' experiences of the recursive relationship between the overall climate of a relationship system and the playfulness of the individual members that make up that system. Therefore, it includes the participants' experiences of the conditions that seem to foster or inhibit playfulness in a system, as well as their experiences of the influence of playfulness on the system as a whole. This theme includes one subordinate theme that reflects the participant's experiences of how playfulness can influence learning.

The fourth theme, emotional distance, encompasses the participants' descriptions of how they experienced playfulness and humor arising differently in relationships according to the levels of emotional closeness and separateness involved. Thus, the two

subordinate themes in this group are emotional closeness and emotional separateness, which contain examples of the participants' experiences of how play and humor can function differently according to this aspect of a relationship. The final superordinate theme is changing perspective, and it primarily deals with the participants' use of playfulness and humor with regards to intense, serious, and/or anxious situations that could then be seen, experienced, and perhaps responded to differently. It is broken down into two subordinate themes, which further categorize the participants' descriptions as focused on a shift in emotion or a shift in thinking.

**Neutral objectivity.** The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants generally described objectivity as an experience of neutrality. The two concepts seemed to be paired such that when the participants described objectivity, they generally referred to seeing the facts of something paired with a lack of judgment and distanced from a strong emotional response. For example, one participant stated:

This is talking about reality and it's hitting... It's making sense. People can identify with this in their own lives. This wasn't a pathology in me this was just a human process that was described in such a way they could ... respond to it.

Another stated:

Interviewee: I think a humorous moment can shine a light on what's real for us.

Researcher: On what's real?

Interviewee: I think we can get a little bit... If we can get a little bit out of the depths of a problem, by whatever means. Let's say it's humor. Maybe exercise would do the same thing. I think we can look at it a little bit more objectively.

Another participant referred to “emotional objectivity” when describing examples in which he had used theory to better understand his family system and become more emotionally neutral about it. Due to the closely related nature of these qualities, neutrality and objectivity were combined to create a single theme.

All of the participants made the connection between playfulness and humor and the capacity to be neutral and objective about one’s life and circumstances. One of the interviewees defined the whole notion of playfulness in terms of objectivity:

Researcher: When you think about play, playfulness, and humor? What does that mean to you? What do you think of those things?

Interviewee: Well, I think it’s tied to an ability to be objective about yourself and everybody else. The extent to which one is not taking himself more seriously than he needs to, or anybody else for that matter.

The participant who referred to “emotional objectivity” stated, “It permits both directness but also seeing the lighter side of what’s going on.” He pointed out that being able to walk the fine line between humor and tragedy in the way described by Bowen, communicated neutrality to people. However, he stated, “It’s something you’ve got to live. You can’t just explain it to somebody and expect a result.”

*Objectivity and neutrality contributing to humor and playfulness.* Several of the participants observed that their effort to apply Bowen family systems theory had helped them to approach life with greater objectivity and neutrality, and that this had contributed to their capacity to be playful and humorous in their relationships. In particular, they highlighted the neutral character of this playfulness. For example, one interviewee described using humor at a moment of tension between several family members, stating,

“it came I think from the objectivity that allowed me to be more playful, because I thought I really understood better what was going on.” He stated that he believed his use of humor communicated his lack of reactivity to the situation, which helped his family members to calm down.

Another interviewee stated:

Getting neutral about whatever it is really helps a lot with humor, because if you’re not critical about what you’re doing or what somebody else is doing or your reaction to them or any of that, then I think you can... Then I think there’s a lot of room for humor.

This interviewee gave several examples of how her objectivity about herself was received by others with humor. For example, she described giving her first presentation within the Bowen community in which she talked about herself. She stated that at the time she had been scared and wanted the approval of the audience, and was shocked when they fell into hysterics. Her understanding of this laughter was that it was a response to her capacity to be objective about her own emotional process:

I think it has to do with nailing it. You know, really describing an accurate emotional process. And also somehow I’ve gotten to the point where I can be honest about myself and, you know, whether I’m challenged or having trouble, without... without having people say, “Oh don’t be so hard on yourself”.

One interviewee suggested that the connection between objectivity and playfulness had contributed to her lack of burnout:

Interviewee: I’ve been practicing 40 years and I’ve never felt the slightest bit of burnout. Never.



Researcher: And what do you think the relationship is between that and being able to be more playful or humorous.

Interviewee: Well, I think, again that when you can be objective about yourself and everyone else. You understand what you think you can do to be helpful right alongside what you probably can't do or don't need to do. And you're just present and interested and want to learn something about someone else's life. Then it has to be funny because everybody [laughter] . . . everybody's in the same bind.

*Humor and playfulness contributing to objectivity and neutrality.* Several of the participants also observed that humor could contribute to the capacity to be more objective and less judgmental. One interviewee stated that humor gives us the opportunity to see something “differently . . . with less judgment . . . With less, sort of, you know . . . the negative implications about it,” and suggested that more attention should be paid to understanding the use of humor to sustain neutrality in the clinical relationship. As stated above, another interviewee made the point that humor is one means of getting “out of the depths of a problem,” and thus allowing us to look at it more objectively. He suggested, “a humorous moment can help shine a light on what's real for us.” This interviewee stated that he uses humor quite intentionally in his clinical practice as an almost “inescapable route towards seeing oneself and one's own behavior.”

*Acceptance.* Five of the participants in the study identified acceptance as a component of experiencing playfulness or humor in relation to getting more objective and neutral. This included acceptance of self, others, one's own family, and the human condition.

*Self.* One participant stated that he had used humor a lot in his efforts to manage his reactivity and that he had found it “tremendously useful in simply accepting who you are, and being clear about who you’re not, and accepting what you can and can’t do sometimes.” He gave an example of recognizing the humor in his behavior:

I used to be hard on myself. And now I just... I literally sometimes stand there and laugh out loud. And I say, “This is so funny. This is just so ridiculous, but it’s so representative of me. And I can’t put on any mask. I can’t employee any pseudo self to fool myself into thinking that I am other than this way.

In contrast, he explained that there are times when he feels defensive and thinks that he should be able to do something that he doesn’t know how to do, stating that under such conditions, “I can lose my playfulness pretty quickly.”

*Family.* One interviewee stated that she didn’t think she had been particularly funny until she was able to see herself and her family as they really were:

You know, instead of saying ... we didn’t do it right, and, oh, you know, this is wrong that’s wrong. But just saying, this is what was. This is what it is. And there you are. And being able to go for the platform of acceptance then led me down the path of humor.

Another interviewee described spending the first 10-15 years of his training “getting a handle on just how much the family and the multigenerational system shaped and defined my life.” He explained that after finally accepting that people are “stuck” with who they are, he recognized that “you can have fun with who you are.” He stated that it had been important for him to make therapy less about change and more about acceptance:

There's a lot one can do by not changing and by simply, you know, learning to live with life as it is; without this extraordinary pressure of trying to be in charge, in control, on top of things. And I think that's really freed me to be a lot more playful.

This participant stated that the latter half of his effort with Bowen theory had therefore been much more enjoyable, and that he finds much more humor in what cannot be changed or controlled.

*Human condition.* Several participants also pointed to the connection between self-acceptance and acceptance of the human condition, along with the inevitable difficulty of trying to negotiate the emotional process. As one participant put it, "it has to be funny because . . . everybody's in the same bind". Another participant stated:

You know, humans are humans, and you know we make mistakes all the time. We never get it exactly right. There's always more to do. . . . And I think once you can accept the fact that being human is what we are and we are never going to get *there* there—get close but we're never going to get *there*. And then I think you can find a lot of stuff funny.

Later in the interview the same participant added, "I think when I came to see what I do is sort of part of the whole thing about being human, then I could begin to. . . I could accept myself." Another participant stated that his clinical experience had helped him to take things less seriously and "to realize that, you know, rather than trying to be in charge of all of this, that part of the trick is how to respect the process we are part of."

*Aging and death.* Two of the participants specifically brought up the idea of acceptance related to aging and death. To illustrate the benefit of accepting things that

cannot be controlled, one interviewee quoted a terminally ill client, who told him, “You know, the nice thing about dying is you don’t have to worry about dying anymore!”

Another interviewee spoke about the importance of play as a component of accepting decline and death at the end of life:

I think you really... benefit from the broader view of life and its irony and the things you can’t do anything about; the reality that at some point you’re going to be gone. And so what does it take to really have a sense of joy and fun and gratefulness? . . . . I think [play is] extremely important in end-of-life. I really do. Because I don’t think there’s anything that makes people more anxious than the whole idea of death.

**Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously.** All of the participants referred to situations in which they described the benefit of taking themselves, another person, or a situation less seriously. As described above, one interviewee connected the ability to be objective to the capacity not to take oneself or others more seriously than necessary. Another participant said, “If you can look at emotional process and look at what you’re doing and find humor in it. . . . it’s a gift.” One participant even suggested that the ability to laugh at oneself could be used as a psychotherapy outcome measure, and added:

You know, that which we’ve always been so deadly serious about, we kind of . . . get to a stage in our lives where we find the absurdity or the humor, the other side of it.... I think it’s a bigger deal than we’ve studied.

One of the participants suggested that being less serious about oneself “frees people up a little bit” and “gives you the ability to think differently.” He pointed out that

people get stuck in behavioral patterns and with “inflexible definitions of self,” and that “humor can be a really good wedge into a very rigid situation.” He used a hypothetical example in which he described talking to someone who is complaining about her partner, and saying humorously, “Well I’m sure *you* don’t do X,” as opposed to asking, “Do you do that?” He explained that using humor in this way can help people admit to themselves what their part in the problem is.

The idea of not taking oneself too seriously being connected to both acceptance and objectivity was highlighted by another client, who stated, “I think a lot of humor and being able to laugh at yourself has to do with accepting who you are and how you came to be, and also finding ways to be honest with your foibles.” An example that illustrated this idea was provided by another participant, who described giving a presentation to a group of clients that included a description of the symbiotic relationship between a crab and a sea anemone. He explained that the crab carries around two sea anemones in its larger claws as a defense against octopuses, and that while this is a good defensive strategy it limits the crab from using its claws for other things such as getting food. He stated that when he described this fact during the presentation, one of the clients leapt out of his chair and said, “That’s me at a party with two beers in my hand! A beer in each hand... As long as I had a beer in each hand I was protected... from whatever could come at me, you know?” The interviewee stated that he then asked the client what that behavior prevented him from doing and he replied, “Well, I can’t really hug somebody really easily with two beers in my hand.”

***Absurdity.*** The first subordinate theme in this group is absurdity. Five of the participants specifically described laughing at the absurdity or ridiculousness of the

human experience. One participant remarked, “We are really kind of silly!” and later stated, “The human is a funny thing! We are very funny! And... we keep doing the same thing over and over again!” Another said, “It’s fun to see, not just the absurdity... in my clients, but the absurdity for all of us.” Both of these participants described the process of learning to see and appreciate human absurdity. Speaking of the later years of his practice the second participant said:

I’m now just a lot more, you know, accepting of myself, of other people where they are, of the absurdity in life, of its twists and turns. Of... the paradoxes, you know? How much the awful things in life make us better and how much the things that you think make life better make life so much more complex. So I think the absurdities, the paradoxes. . . are just interesting. I think I enjoy the process more.

One of the participants who had worked in a substance abuse program stated that he had become very intentional in his use of humor, and explained that this approach was based on clinical observations about what was useful to people. He stated that one of the things he had noticed was that:

The people who tended to do better in recovery were the ones who could find authentic ways of laughing at the irony of some of their decisions. You know, who weren’t so burdened in guilt. . . . Who could laugh at the absurdity of the whole process of addiction and the process of recovery.

Another participant observed:

We just get into these situations and sometimes they're absurd and ridiculous and we have to find a way to manage and when we finally do we look back and we laugh. It's like I can't believe that's really what happened.

In contrast, one of the participants suggested that the capacity to see and laugh at absurdity was sometimes less about finding the situation funny, and more about using humor as a coping mechanism:

It's awfully useful to be able to see the absurdity of a lot of the situations we get ourselves into. Not that they are innately funny but sometimes they're so ridiculous that all you... All that's left for you to do is laugh at them.

However, he also emphasized the value of being able to laugh at oneself and say, "There! I did it again! The same thing I keep saying I'm never going to do again... Here I did it again! Isn't this ridiculous!"

*Looseness.* Five out of the six participants in the study used the term "loose" to describe being less uptight about something, and all the participants described their increased capacity to be loose as a product of the efforts they had made toward differentiation of self. One participant described herself as initially uptight, and explained that she began to loosen up once she began to look at and take responsibility for her mistakes. Another participant described the importance of loosening up in order to be able to be playful in his work:

To have humor or to be playful with my clients requires me being loose about the thing that we are playful about. Meaning, you know, if there's emotional work I have to do within myself, and I have to be loose about this not just as it applies in their life.

One of the participants also provided examples of how the looseness in his responses to family members helped them to talk about things in a different way, and linked his ability to do so with increased objectivity:

Researcher: I'm curious about your personal capacity to be playful or humorous, to have the looseness to be able to be playful and humorous with your family. How did that shift over the years in relation to studying theory?

Interviewee: Well I think the more I understood.... You know, the key there I think is the ability to see the system in a more objective way, and understand the distinction between subjectivity about it and objectivity about it.

*Emotional flexibility.* Two of the participants also made specific reference to a type of looseness, emotional flexibility, which reflects the freedom to be both serious and light. Speaking of play behavior, one participant stated:

I would say [it is] very much a part of Bowen theory in the sense that, as Bowen used to say, there's a fine line between tragedy and humor. And people appreciate it when you can sort of walk back-and-forth between the tragedy of the situation they're in and color it appropriately with humor. And I think it... It's useful to people.

Another said:

If somebody comes in and they are terribly humorous I will turn more serious in the interest of flexibility. So they can experience something different about themselves, to which they can then have access in addition to the humor—which might really be a defensive and anxiety-binding sort of thing. Likewise, if



somebody comes in dead serious, I try to get to a point at some juncture where there's a space for a little bit of lightness, levity if not out right humor.

He stated that he saw the ability to be both serious and light as something that lowers the anxiety between people and places people on "an equal footing." He explained that this was about participating in a relationship that was "separate, equal, and open," in which neither person is "overly determined" by the relationship.

***Seriousness***: The final subordinate theme in this category is seriousness, and it reflects the comments the participants made about the appropriateness of seriousness. For example, one participant stated that the goal of seeing one's part in a problem and being able to define oneself as "present and accounted for but not caught up in what's going on" could be achieved through "I-positions, or humor, or whatever a person can think up." He also provided examples of times when he or another person used seriousness—including a time when he used "some controlled anger"—to accomplish this.

Several participants referred to observing seriousness when a lot was at stake for a person, and when someone bore a lot of responsibility. This included the idea that seriousness was appropriate earlier in their professional lives:

I was very playful in the beginning and it was fun. And then it got very serious when I started this thing. And it should've. You know, I really had to, you know... I don't know... work harder on myself and get a grip.

Another participant stated, "I think early on I was just so serious, as I probably should've been then, about it all." Several of the participants also described the idea of taking oneself or a situation less seriously, whilst simultaneously taking one's work or the effort to define a self seriously. One participant stated that the capacity to take oneself less

seriously was a “hallmark of higher levels of differentiation” and clarified that this involved the ability to “take the measurement of self and our place in the world seriously” whilst being “less serious about *me*. About, you know, ‘what do you think of me, what do I think of me, who am I, what am I?’”

**Emotional climate/circuit.** The words used in the title of this theme came from two comments made by the participants. In describing the interplay between playfulness and the effort to define a self, one participant stated, “The more you calm down about yourself and everybody else... I think the more open and flexible you’re able to be. And that creates a climate that’s more fun and enjoyable and playful.” Another participant referred to the way in which becoming more neutral while remaining in contact with an emotional system could help people to “settle down.” He stated, “Bowen used to term it, ‘you respond to the emotional logic of a system not the rational logic in a system’ and when you get outside of that I think it just automatically breaks the circuit.”

This theme reflects the experiences and ideas of the participants that relate to 1) how the playfulness of an individual can influence the climate of an emotional system, and 2) how the emotional climate of a system can influence the presence/absence of playfulness. The combination of the words ‘climate’ and ‘circuits’ is intended to capture the participants’ descriptions of the circuit-like emotional interconnectivity of relationship systems, and the way in which individuals in an emotional circuit are simultaneously influenced by and can influence the emotional climate of that system.

***The influence of playfulness on the system:*** Two of the participants gave examples of their experiences as the leaders of organizations in which they observed the function of playfulness and humor on the system as a whole. One participant referred to

humor as having the potential to be bonding and to help create a culture. He described a professional situation that was very serious, and his intentional use of humor to help create a particular kind of environment: “to find humor and to have people connect through laughter is really important in terms of how to create ... a work culture that was connecting and supporting, and to create ways of seeing the absurdity in our work.”

Another participant observed that the frequency of humor in his workplace had changed significantly with a change in leadership from a more playful to a more serious person. He noted that it was helpful when the organization was more jovial, and then added, “at least it was more fun for people and I think it helped to keep anxiety toned down when we hit financial problems and things like that.”

Other participants gave examples of the use of playfulness and humor in a smaller system, such as in the relationship with a partner, within a family of origin, in a clinical relationship, or with a supervisor. One participant described increased playfulness and the ability to have fun as a factor in being able to get closer to people. This participant also stated, “humor sometimes is a way of creating some togetherness. Trying to be comfortable in an otherwise tense situation.” Another participant described how he and his siblings had intentionally used playfulness to “crack the tension” in his family of origin:

You know, it was almost overwhelming at times... a kind of incubator of anxiety—chronic anxiety—that we lived in in our family. And I think humor helped cut that a bit—quite a bit actually—to make it more palatable, more tolerable, to discharge a... fair amount of it through humor.

Several participants described the way in which a playful supervisor could help supervisees to relax, get loose, take themselves less seriously, and calm down. One participant provided an explanation for how the playfulness of one individual could influence others in this way:

Interviewee: Playfulness is a very good way of getting outside the system and communicating that you're not stuck in the same old pattern without trying to explain it to people. They can just see it—that you're different.

Researcher: How do you think it's different to communicate it nonverbally compared to just literally explaining it.

Interviewee: You're living it I think. It's just you're living it and... Because people are so sensitive as you know, to these emotional cues back-and-forth, and when you get outside that I think people recognize it and really appreciate it.

***The influence of the emotional climate of the system on the presence/absence of playfulness:*** Several participants described their experiences of participating in an emotional process that they found either facilitating or inhibiting to the expression of playfulness or humor. One participant reflected on a period of her life in which she thought she had managed herself poorly in the face of pressures from other people. She described “losing self” and stated, “When you lose self you're not playful.... You lose self and you lose humor.” Elsewhere she noted, “I do think there is a lot about being a human that is amusing. But it's not always readily acceptable in somebody's emotional process.” Another participant referred to quickly losing playfulness when he felt “wound up thinking there's something I need to be able to do that I don't know how to do right now.” Notably, two of the participants referred to the serious character of the Bowen

network in the early days, and to the effort to define a self in this atmosphere, which one person described as “buttoned down.”

One participant referred to feeling more freedom to be playful in the earlier part of a relationship:

I was very playful in the beginning.... In a new relationship you're very independent; you have a lot of yourself still in it. Then you get in a relationship and then the togetherness plays a part. And then you start to lose some of your self, and that becomes a problem. So I think at the beginning... I was a pretty free bird.

Another participant reflected on the fact that over the years, clinical experience had given him greater conviction in his understanding of human behavior based on theory, and that this had helped him to retain the ability to be playful in the face of anxiety. He stated “there’s so much that pulls you in the opposite direction. . . . like guilt and like anger that pull you right into the system.” He then gave an example of how this had shaped how he relates to his clients with playful neutrality and how they respond to him:

Researcher: Are you saying that having that conviction and sureness... Does that feed into your ability to be playful and humorous with people in general?

Interviewee: I think so, it just... Without sounding critical or dismissive, yeah. I think people really do appreciate that.... I see [description of client].... I've seen him for five or six years.... Pretty serious fellow. But I think the way I related to him... he said, “You know what I like about coming here, is your respect for me as a human being”. And that’s a nice compliment to get.

*The influence of the family emotional system on playfulness.* Many of the

participants referred to the frequency and character of playfulness in their families of origin. Two of the participants described their families of origin as very serious, although one described how the pervasive seriousness that was present in both her parents' families had gradually evolved to a high level of playfulness over the course of several generations. She stated her understanding of this earlier family seriousness as stemming from an underlying "unsureness. . . . lack of clarity about self, and... a suspicion about the rest of the world." Both of these participants described being uptight and in some ways struggling to be playful in their earlier lives. They both described their increased capacity to play and be humorous as a result of their efforts to define a self.

Two of the participants described growing up in families that included a lot of humor and playfulness. One described every member of his family as being funny, and referred to humor as a way to connect. He stated, "I think I just sort of picked up a lot of that sort of thing by osmosis." The other participant described himself and his mother as being very playful, whereas his father and brother were not. These participants both described themselves as having been very playful throughout their lives.

Another participant described a family dynamic in which the children were the subject of the family projection process, and were much more playful than the parents as a way to manage the anxiety. This participant described himself as naturally playful and carefree, but stated that he initially struggled to "find his voice" at the beginning of his career. The sixth participant described himself as having been a "semi- clown" when he was growing up, and stated that this was a somewhat anxiety-driven playful functioning position in a family that was generally more serious. This participant described himself as

playful, but referred to the long-term efforts it had taken to be able to maintain humor during anxious times.

Several of the participants referred to family members or clients in which one member of a couple was significantly more playful than the other, and several of the participants referred to the influence of sibling position on the capacity to be playful, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

- I don't know if youngests are funnier than oldests, but, I would suspect so in general. . . . You know, you spend a lot years watching your older sibs trying to live up to something, and there's a part of you that says: yeah, screw that! You know, and you sort of ... take what your parents say seriously, but there's a part of you that has more room and space to not take it that seriously. So... I wonder if there's not more emotional space for youngests to be comedians. . . . taking things seriously but also seeing the absurdity or seeing the other side.
- One of the other things about being the youngest is that you're not taken seriously. . . . Maybe because you're the youngest you come across as a little too frivolous and so forth.
- My father was the favorite of his mother's. The middle child of three. And my father is always trying to prove his worthiness. He's trying to live up to his mother's expectations of him. And it was all very serious. . . . My mother would tease him and he wouldn't take it well. . . . I think for him there was a lot at stake. And there was a lot at stake that he couldn't get loose about.
- Oldests tend to be more serious-minded in general. But Bowen had a great sense of humor really and he was an oldest.

*Learning.* The participants all referred in some way to how a playful climate can be conducive to learning. For example participants stated that a playful climate could promote interest, the desire to learn, curiosity, calmness, seriousness about the effort, thoughtfulness, and engagement of the intellectual system. One participant observed that a humorous approach to training and teaching could be disarming, and linked this idea to creating a “community of learners” in which clients, interns, licensed therapists, and supervisors were all learning about Bowen theory, themselves, and their functioning in their families of origin. He stated, “If there’s a way to communicate things . . . in a . . . fun, more interesting way, I enjoyed that. So, I think I learn better that way too. And I think other people do as well.

One participant described how, as she embarked on her study of Bowen theory within the Bowen community, she felt “fascinated and unencumbered by any relationship pressure,” and stated, “I could play a lot because I didn’t know . . . I was just excited about what I was learning and I couldn’t believe what I saw sometimes. And I was just very naïve. But the more I learned the more uptight I got.” She explained that eventually she was able to regain her playfulness by defining herself more clearly in her relationships.

Two of the participants connected objectivity, neutrality and playfulness with learning. One participant noted that increased objectivity contributed to the capacity to be, “just present and interested” and wanting “to learn something about someone else’s life,” which she said inevitably lead to laughter at the absurdity of life. The other participant stated that humor:

Gives people an opportunity to get loose about something they were tight about, and see it differently . . . with less judgment. . . . It’s an opportunity to sort of make



the world bigger and more complicated and more interesting and maybe it arouses sometimes curiosity. Maybe it arises sort of a desire to discover more about something or somebody or about my life or about my relationship.

The connection between playfulness and people's ability to think more clearly was also emphasized by two of the participants. Their comments are included below in the theme, changing perspective.

**Emotional distance.** The fourth theme comprises the participants' experiences of how playfulness and humor can function in relationships characterized by different levels of emotional closeness and separateness. The participants provided a range of examples, including the manifestation of play and humor as an expression of open authenticity and as a way to communicate one's separateness from the anxiety in the system. In contrast, the participants also gave examples of the use of play and humor to connect and build meaningful relationships without being particularly open about self, and as a way to bind systemic anxiety.

**Emotional closeness.** Several of the participants addressed the role of play and humor in bringing people together and facilitating ongoing connections. For example, they described play and humor as mechanisms for "bonding", "attracting" people, creating a "culture," and creating "togetherness." One participant added that humor could be used as a way of "trying to be comfortable in an otherwise tense situation." Two of the participants also referred to the phenomenon of humor at another person's expense, and one participant described this in terms of an emotional triangle, where the joke would be about the outsider.

*Teasing.* Every participant gave an example of teasing as part of an emotionally connected relationship, and three people made explicit reference to teasing and the kind of relational contexts within which it emerges. This included being in a relationship in which the people know each other well, being neutral, putting in the work to have an open relationship, and being connected, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

- There's a lot of inside joking because we know each other very, very well....  
There's just a lot of teasing.... And just laughing about things that have to do with us personally and that have nothing to do with anyone else. So, it's a binding kind of thing, in a very comfortable kind of way.
- When you can get neutral, when you can get uncritical—not judgmental—then I think this [referring to teasing] sort of comes out naturally
- Researcher: You called it teasing. Is that the kind of humor that you experience in other relationships in your life?  
Interviewee: Yes. I do. I have that with my children. Very open. You know they can say anything to me. I really don't get offended. And vice versa. I mean we are a very open family and I think we've worked to get there. I know I have.
- To have humor or to be playful with my clients requires me.... [to be] in a kind of relationship with the client that they won't feel shamed or mocked. Because they know I've connected with them in a way that I would not say something which if said by a stranger they may take as shaming or being mocked, but from me in that moment they would hear it as someone who they trust and feel connected with who is trying to push them to see the absurdity in what they're saying or doing.

*Emotional separateness.* All the participants described how their efforts to define themselves as emotionally separate individuals had in some way influenced how they utilized play or humor in their relationships, and four of the participants described how this work had made play more available to them. The work on defining self included aspects of the themes already listed, such as calming down, learning to manage one's own reactivity, developing the capacity to laugh at oneself, taking things less seriously, becoming more objective, getting more neutral, loosening up, and learning to walk "the fine line between tragedy and humor."

One participant described how she had worked very hard to get to a place in which she could be objective and playful, and emphasized the way in which her playfulness and humor is very spontaneous and authentic:

- You know, for me it's very real and there's nothing contrived about it. . . . I don't go into a situation thinking, "Boy I need to be funny and if I can that would be helpful." It just happens. . . . It's a very organic process.
- [speaking about playfulness and humor] I think it's become more and more a part of what I do. And, in most of my sessions—not all—there is laughter. And there is playfulness, because I will just, you know, come out of my most real self, and say something.

Gaining the capacity to be playful and humorous as an outcome of the effort to differentiate a self was also emphasized by one of the other participants, who described the importance of acceptance in this process. Referring to developing playfulness in the primary emotional triangle with her parents, she stated:

I had a long way to go to get out of that rigid, critical, you know, dependency on the other to make it better for me, fury when they didn't, or distancing because I didn't have the courage to say what I thought. I mean that took a long time, step-by-step. I would say the good news is a little change makes a very big difference. And so, as I was plodding through all this, these little changes did make differences that really were, you know, sort of enlightening and hopeful and lightened the load. But, you know, it was a journey.

One participant stated that he has used humor a lot in his efforts to manage his own reactivity, become more self accepting, and clearer about who he is, but stated that he didn't see humor as a significant aspect of becoming clear about what he stands for or believes. Another participant described himself as having always been a playful and humorous person, but explained that recognizing and understanding the multigenerational emotional process in his own family had helped him to become more accepting of himself and his clients and thus freed him up to be playful in his clinical work: "I'm much more at peace and find much more ... humor in what you can't change and what you can't control."

For one of the participants, the effort to define himself involved managing his concerns about how he came across to others. He stated that as a youngest he was naturally quite playful, but was afraid of seeming frivolous and initially made the effort to come across as authoritative. He described a "double-edged sword" of wanting to be taken seriously, but worried that if he "dipped toes in the water" of being funny, he wouldn't be taken seriously. He described being able to "find [his] voice," and "have it be a humorous one".

Another participant described his humor at a young age as being an automatic response to the family process that was “life-saving”—although he then stated that this choice of words was “a little strong.” He described gradually increasing his ability to use humor with his family members from a place of understanding, objectivity, and neutrality, and illustrated how this had served to help other family members to settle down in response to him.

This participant also described playfulness as a good way of communicating that you are outside the system and no longer stuck in the same pattern. He provided a clinical example that illustrated this, involving a woman who had moved back in with her elderly parents. He described how the woman’s octogenarian mother had said, in a guilt-inducing tone, that due to a flood in the basement she was planning to go down and bring an expensive rug back up to the first floor. He stated that the woman would normally have felt guilty and rushed to intervene, but on this occasion she was able to lightly reply, “Well maybe dad can help you, and I’ll stand here by the phone ready to call the emergency room when one of you has a heart attack!”

*Managing emotions.* One of the participants also brought up how humor could help a person to remain connected but more emotionally self-contained in a stressful situation: “Humor conveys a sense of optimism and the idea that we can in some way be present to [a problem] and think about it instead of being eaten up by it.” He also described ways in which he had observed his family members maintain a certain amount of distance from uncomfortable emotions in the form of denial: “I think my mom distanced from her own emotions using humor. I’m not going to say that was in net terms to her advantage or disadvantage. I would have to imagine it was both.”

**Changing perspective.** The final theme captures the participants' ideas about how play and humor can help to change how a person thinks, feels, and responds to a situation that is typically experienced with seriousness. One participant gave a clinical example that illustrated such a shift, involving a homeless client who presented with the symptoms of borderline personality disorder. He described an interaction with this woman that occurred when she came in very upset one day:

She said, through some tears, a veil of tears, 'I'm killing my mother!' I said, 'Really? Tell me about that.' She said, 'I'm killing my mother. My mother can't stand who I am' and this and that and the other, 'I'm killing my mother.' I said, 'Well, how old is your mother?' She said, '85.' I said, 'Man, you are one shitty murderer!' and it opened the door to a great discussion.

Several of the participants provided explanations for how humor and play might help to shift a person's perspective so dramatically. These explanations can be broadly separated in terms of the two subordinate themes: shift in emotion and shift in thinking.

***Shift in Thinking.*** A number of participants suggested that humor and playfulness could open up the possibility of thinking differently about a situation. For example, one of the participants stated that when people are stuck in repetitive behavioral patterns and with rigid ways of thinking about their own identities, thinking less seriously about themselves gives them "the ability to think differently." Several participants observed that thinking differently was made possible by reengaging the intellectual system. The same participant suggested that this had to do with being able to "see the difference between thinking and feelings," and stated that, "I think a humorous moment can shine a light on what's real for us." He explained:

If we are so overwhelmed by anxiety, physiologically the brain is not able to use its resources in a relatively balanced way.... Until we can rebalance the resources a bit between intellect and emotion, we're not going to be able to look differently at our situation. We are particularly not going to be able to see our part in it. And I think that's one of the things that I try to use humor for particularly

Most of the participants referred to the idea of lightness or lightening, and two people specifically used these terms in conjunction with the idea of thinking better. One person stated:

If you can lighten it up enough, people—I believe—can think better. I think they're not as overwhelmed. I think the emotional system is not as highly triggered, leaving room for the intellect to perhaps come to the fore a bit more.

Referring to humor, another person stated, "I think it helps people think better if it lightens the atmosphere and the discussion."

*A different emotional experience.* Several of the participants provided a description of how humor could help people to have a different emotional experience of an intense and uncomfortable situation:

- A part of what happens with humor is that sometimes things that are serious—and that we have, ordinarily, a very intense set of emotions associated with—we can hear differently when it becomes something that's humorous or funny. We can have a different emotional experience about something that [we] ordinarily might ... take seriously, or have a problem, [a] negative reaction to, or that... we find disturbing or disruptive.... It allows us.... maybe to hear a new way of thinking about it or a new idea that comfortably [we] can hear through humor that we may

not be able to hear if the same idea was ... in a context of being serious. Or... in a different... with a different kind of emotion attached to it. Like anger or resentment of frustration.

- I believe [humor] helps us get out of our overwhelming emotion and get a little bit of perspective to see that we can and will laugh again no matter how dire the moment may seem.

Another participant described how a terminally ill family member was able to make use of humor when discussing his funeral arrangements, which prompted a lot of laughter, and which the participant stated, “was enormously helpful.”

One participant described his experiences working with clients in recovery, whom he described as “deadly serious creatures”:

In some respects the brain is very reptilian in early recovery. And ... they don't have access to those higher functioning things, or those higher functioning things tend to get them in trouble. You know, strong emotions and things like that tend to be problematic because there's a real fear of ... diving into deep, deep, deep, intense emotions when you're in early recovery because you're afraid of going back to using substances.

He described his very intentional use of humor throughout his work with these clients, and explained his thinking that the avoidance of strong emotions shouldn't extend to humor:

I always thought, ok I hear that, you don't want strong emotions, but I didn't think that humor represented that. I thought ... humor and playfulness was a way of



becoming more mammalian. You know, let's get you out of reptilian and into being a little bit more mammal.

### **Processes**

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants frequently described the themes in relation to one another, and often articulated how one aspect of a theme could contribute to creating the conditions that are conducive for another to emerge—either in the context of play/humor, or as part of a process that was in itself conducive to play/humor. The preceding section presented the themes individually in order to define each theme and illustrate how it was derived from the content of the interviews. This section presents a summary of all the participants' descriptions of processes that involved play/humor. The processes are listed alongside the superordinate themes involved in each process (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

The participants described a total of 101 processes. During analysis of these processes, two broad superordinate categories emerged, and further analysis of these categories revealed two layers of subordinate categories:

1. Ways in which play/humor can contribute to creating the conditions that are conducive to the emergence of aspects of the five subordinate themes.
  - a. Focus on the individual
    - i. Shift out of intense emotional response
    - ii. Shift in thinking
  - b. Focus on the relationship system
    - i. Connection
    - ii. Staying outside the anxiety of the system

- iii. Creating a playful climate
2. Processes that can contribute to increasing/decreasing the availability of play/humor to an individual or system.
    - a. Experience
    - b. Neutrality/Objectivity
    - c. Acceptance
    - d. Anxiety management
    - e. Emotional separateness within the system
    - f. Contexts that can contribute to decreasing the availability of play/humor

The listing and categorization of the processes is not meant to indicate any causal relationships. Rather, the processes describe the ways in which one or more thing—such as an experience, a behavior, an idea, or an environment—can contribute to the emergence of one or more other things. Furthermore, the distinctions made in the categorization of the processes are not meant to indicate that the processes in one category are completely distinct from those in another. Thus, the labeling of a process as “focused on the individual” is not an indication that this process is not in any way influenced by or influential to a relationship system. The effort to organize the processes in this way is an attempt to shine a light on some of the nuances of the participants’ experiences. By exploring how the themes are connected, it is possible to draw out meanings from the interviews that were not previously evident.

**Category 1: Processes generated by play/humor.** The first subordinate category includes the processes that describe how play/humor can contribute to creating the

conditions that are conducive to the emergence of aspects of the five superordinate themes. This category contains 45 of the 101 processes. Every participant contributed processes to this category.

***The emergence of subordinate process categories within the first category.***

Further analysis of the processes that fell into the first category involved sorting the processes into hierarchically organized groups. The analysis revealed that the whole category could be sorted into two groups based on which processes were primarily focused on the experience of an individual (see Tables 4 and 5), and which processes were primarily focused on a relationship system (see Table 6). These categories could then be split into further groupings based on the initial response to—in the case of the individually focused processes—or outcome of—in the case of the relationally focused processes—the play/humor. The final subordinate categories produced by this sorting process all lined up well with aspects of the superordinate themes:

- Shift out of intense emotional response (Changing Perspective + Taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously)
- Shifting thinking (Changing Perspective/Neutral Objectivity)
- Connection (Emotional Distance + Emotional Climate/Circuit)
- Staying outside the anxiety of the system (Emotional Distance + Emotional Climate/Circuit)
- Creating a playful climate (Emotional Climate/Circuit)

***a) Focus on the individual.*** This category includes the participants' descriptions of processes that largely address the internal experience of an individual, such as the extent to which his/her intellect is engaged, the extent to which his/her emotional system

is activated, how loosely she/he is responding to a situation, or his/her perception of a situation. Further analysis of this category revealed a subtle distinction between the processes that the participants described in terms of an initial shift out of an intense emotional response—which frequently helped to increase thoughtful intellectual engagement—and the processes described in terms of a change in thinking without reference to an emotional shift. These subcategories are only slightly different to one another and do not imply that the second set of processes did not involve a shift in emotional response, only that it was not emphasized. These subcategories mirror the subordinate categories, shift in emotion and shift in thinking.

*i) Shift out of an intense emotional response.* This category is presented in Table 4. It is the only subordinate process category that includes an example from every single participant. However, approximately half of the examples came from one participant, who focused fairly heavily on this process throughout his interview. Analysis of this set

Table 4: *Ways in which play/humor can contribute to creating the conditions that are conducive to the emergence of aspects of the five superordinate themes. Individual focus*

<b>a. Focus on Individual</b>		
<i>i) Shift out of intense emotional response.</i> (1-6)	1. Humor > out of overwhelming emotion > perspective > see that we will laugh again no matter how dire (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	2. Humor > rebalance physiological resources > look differently at situation > see our part in it (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> </ul>
	3. Humor > lighten up > emotional system less triggered > intellect engaged > think better (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	4. Humor > activates pleasure circuitry > break from intense anxiety > ability to operate differently (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	5. Humor > lightens atmosphere > think better (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>

	6. Playfulness/humor > creates room for calming down + being thoughtful (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	7. Humor can help people rise out of the tragedy of the situation (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	8. Humor about serious subject > different emotional experience > hear it differently/comfortably (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	9. Humor/playfulness > become more mammalian (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	10. Humor > frees people up > take self less seriously (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	11. Find humor in emotional process > lightens the load (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	12. Humor > manage own reactivity (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>
	13. Humor > allows different emotional experience > have another perspective (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	14. Humor > distance from own emotions (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
<i>ii) Shifting thinking</i> (2, 3, 5, 6)	1. Humor > get loose about something they were uptight about > see it differently and neutrally > opportunity to make the world bigger and more interesting > arouses curiosity (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	2. Humor > shine a light on what's real > get out of the depths of a problem > more objective (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> </ul>
	3. Absurdity > objectivity / laugh at self (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	4. Using neutral humor within connected relationship > client laugh at self, see absurdity of self (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	5. Lighten moment > reengage intellect > less overwhelmed (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	6. See absurdity > complex becomes more manageable / therapy becomes fun (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	7. Less serious about self > think differently + increase flexibility of self definition (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>

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8. Step outside of self and laugh at self > do better in recovery (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
9. Humor > accepting who you are + clear about self (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> </ul>

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*Note.* Processes do not indicate a causal relationship. The numbers in brackets indicate which participants contributed each process/set of processes. The theme, “Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously” is represented by the text, “Taking \* less seriously.”

of processes suggests that the primary themes involved in these processes are: changing perspective and not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously. Examples include:

- Interviewee: I try at least to move it to some opportunity within a session... If not a belly laugh, then some sort of a lightness of moment.

Researcher: What’s the principal that’s guiding that?

Interviewee: I believe it helps us get out of our overwhelming emotion and get a little bit of perspective to see that we can and will laugh again no matter how dire the moment may seem.

- Humor ... allows us to.... Maybe to hear a new way of thinking about it or a new idea that comfortably can hear through humor that we may not be able to hear if the same idea was on... sort of... was in a context of being serious. Or, you know, sort of, in a different... with a different kind of emotion attached to it. Like anger or resentment of frustration. You know, I’m thinking about with my clients. Sometimes I tease my clients about things. And I do it in a way that brings absurdity, you know, it puts absurdity on the table. And they can hear it ... because.... Humor takes it out of the ordinary frame they have for whatever it is we’re talking about.

The second example illustrates that some of the processes included in this category deal both with an emotional process and a cognitive shift. However, this participant seemed to be pinpointing how the emotional tone attached to an idea can be altered using humor, creating the possibility that the idea can then be experienced and thought of differently. Thus, the author placed this process in the first category.

*Shift in thinking.* The eight processes in this category also involve changing perspective and not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously, but they focus slightly more on neutrality and objectivity. Examples from this set of processes include:

- Interviewee: If we can be a little less serious about ourselves... Which by the way is a hallmark of higher levels of differentiation—being less serious about self, even though we take the measurement of self and our place in the world seriously, we're less serious about *me*—about, you know, “What do you think of me, what do I think of me, who am I, what am I?”

Researcher: And could you just say a little bit more about the significance of thinking less seriously about oneself?

Interviewee: Yeah! I think it gives you the ability to think differently. We can get really stuck, really stuck with inflexible definitions of self.

- So she could hear it in making it absurd in a way that... I think she could hear it otherwise, but I think it allows for her to not just laugh at what I was saying, but maybe in a way even laugh at herself. You know, maybe in a way that, like realize that there's some absurdity in what she does that she could find funny.

**b) Focus on the relationship.** The second subordinate category in this section focuses primarily on the relationship system rather than the individual (see Table 5).

Table 5: *Ways in which play/humor can contribute to creating the conditions that are conducive to the emergence of aspects of the five superordinate themes. Relationship focus*

<b>b) Focus on Relationship System</b>		
<i>i) Connection</i>  (1, 2, 3, 5)	1. Humor > attracting people (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	2. Humor > connect > create supportive culture (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	3. Playfulness > replace seriousness/cutoff (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	4. Communicate in fun way > learn better (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	5. Humor > get people to lighten > hear it more (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	6. Humor > togetherness > comfort in tense situation (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	7. More fun > closer to people (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	8. Laugh at yourself > blunt intensity for others (5) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	9. System with comedian > less stress (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	10. Looseness/playfulness > helped her talk about it in a different way (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	11. Humor > calming/connecting > bonding (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
<i>ii) Staying outside the anxiety of the system</i>  (2, 3, 5, 6)	1. Humor > helps people stay outside the system (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	2. Neutral playfulness > breaks circuit > shifts emotional process (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	3. Ability to be both serious and light > gives each person an equal footing > lowers anxiety (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	4. Humor > detriangling (2, 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional Distance</li> </ul>
	5. Stop trying to fake it > be myself > humor (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	6. Humor > to sustain neutrality in clinical relationship (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>



	7. Neutral humor > communicate that you're not stuck (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
<i>iii) Creating a playful climate</i> (1, 2, 3, 6)	1. Playfulness of supervisor > helps supervisees to take themselves less seriously + take effort seriously > supervisees calm down (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	2. Playful supervisor > helped supervisees relax/get loose about serious things > effective (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	3. Playful leader > playful culture (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	4. Play > change emotional process > change relationship content (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>

*Note.* Processes do not indicate a causal relationship. The numbers in brackets indicate which participants contributed each process/set of processes. The theme, “Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously” is represented by the text, “Taking \* less seriously.”

Analysis of this category revealed that the processes described could be further categorized in terms of their focus on: connection, staying out of the anxiety of the system, and creating a playful climate. Every process in this category involved aspects of the themes: emotional distance, emotional climate/circuit, or both. Most of the processes that had to do with staying out of the anxiety of the system also involved neutrality. The following excerpts provide examples for each category:

- Connection
  - I could see how he used [humor] in attracting quite a circle of people around him.
  - The more fun you can have I think the closer you can get to people.
- Staying outside the anxiety of the system
  - How does one use humor to sustain neutrality in the clinical relationship?...  
And I think it is, or at least it can be. And it could be a valuable part.
  - I'm just gonna be myself, you know? This is who I am. And so I... decided

that ... I would just not try to put on pretenses and become more authentic with the people I was dealing with ... And ... becoming a bit more humorous was part of that.

- Creating a playful climate
  - There were coaches that were.... able to get loose and be playful and to be playful when, you know, if they were to be serious ... would not have been as effective, and their playfulness really helped everyone, sort of, relax and get loose about something which ordinarily would not be as loose.

**Category 2: Processes that can contribute to increasing the availability of play/humor.** The second subordinate category comprises the participants' descriptions of processes that can contribute to increasing the availability of play/humor—rather than processes that emerge out of play/humor (see Table 6). It contains 56 of the 101 processes. Every participant contributed processes to this category.

Table 6: *Contexts that can contribute to increasing the availability of play/humor*

<i>a) Experience</i> (1, 3, 4, 6)	1. Clinical experience > understanding/sureness/trust in face of anxiety> fun/neutral playfulness (6) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>
	2. Clinical experience > surer what you're seeing + and trust it > not get pulled into the system by guilt and anger > more playful and humorous with people without sounding critical or dismissive (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>
	3. Time/clinical experience > neutrality > take it all seriously but not too seriously > fun (3) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	4. Know each other well > inside-joking/teasing > binding (1) (R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/Circuit</li> </ul>

	5. Become more themselves / take more responsibility for self > separate from coach / comfortable in own skin / sure of self > playful (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/Circuit</li> </ul>
	6. Youngests grow up watching their older siblings try to live up to something > more humorous (3) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	7. New relationship / retain self > playful (4) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
<i>b) Neutrality/ Objectivity</i>	1. Study of theory > objectivity / understanding > playfulness > helpful / calming to other (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
(1, 4, 5, 6)	2. Accurately describing emotional process > people can laugh at it > humor (4) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	3. Emotional objectivity > permits directness + seeing lighter side (6) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	4. Getting neutral > humor (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>
	5. Excited about learning > playful (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	6. Seeing self accurately > humor (crab) (5) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	7. Understand theory > understand family > capacity to be playful with family (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	8. See system in different way / greater understanding of distinction between objectivity/subjectivity > playful/humorous with own family (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> </ul>
	9. Objectivity > understand one's role > present/interested/want to learn > funny because everybody's in same bind (recognition of shared absurdity) (1) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	10. Honesty about self + accepting self > able to laugh at self (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
<i>c) Acceptance</i>	1. Acceptance / taking responsibility for one's own mistakes / accurately seeing family/self > loosen up > humor (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
(1, 3, 4, 5)	2. Acceptance of family without judging > humor (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>

	3. See what I do as part of being human > acceptance > humor (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	4. Getting away from pressure to change > freedom to be playful / get neutral / take everything less seriously (3) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	5. Acceptance about death > less anxiety > remain playful (1) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>
	6. Acceptance of multigenerational process > learn to live with it / enjoy life / discover things / make a difference (3) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Perception</li> </ul>
	7. Comfortable in your own skin > able to make fun of self (5) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
<i>d) Anxiety management</i>	1. Terminal illness > open > joking/laughter about death > helpful (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
(1, 2, 5, 6)	2. Anxiety > playful functional position > automatically make light of something > useful (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
	3. Illness > denial + humor (2) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	4. Projection onto kids > humor > helped make anxiety in family system more palatable/ discharge it (5) (R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
<i>e) Emotional separateness within the system</i>	1. Enough removed > not sensitive > laugh a lot (1) (R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
(1, 3, 4, 6)	2. Walk back-and-forth between tragedy and humor > lightens atmosphere > helps people think better (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> <li>• Perspective</li> </ul>
	3. Differentiated playfulness of leader > humor/fun in system > lower anxiety during times of difficulty (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional Distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	4. Comfortable in your own skin + sure of self > able to be playful/humorous (1) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional Distance</li> <li>• Climate/Circuit</li> </ul>
	5. Outside system > looseness > helped family member talk about it in a different way (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	6. Outside system > neutral play > helps people realize you're outside the system (6) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>

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7. Effort to manage self > see own part > humor (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> </ul>
8. Regained self > regained capacity to play (4) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
9. Emotional work on an issue > increases looseness > enables neutral humor within a connected relationship (3) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
10. Effort to manage self in couple > have fun / lighten up (4) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
11. Calm down about yourself and everybody else > open/flexible > playful climate (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
12. Work on self > open > teasing (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
13. Work on self > open/real > play/humor (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
14. Become more themselves / taken more responsibility for self > separate from coach / comfortable in own skin / sure of self > playful (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
15. Work on self > get loose about issues > play/humor + accept play from someone else (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>
16. Working on self > getting neutral > capacity to tease (4) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> </ul>
17. Work on self > see one's part in problem > define self (e.g. with humor) > best tranquilizer (6) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality</li> <li>• Objectivity</li> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
18. From intense focus on other to focus on own reaction > seeing my part > humor (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectivity</li> </ul>
19. Emotional separateness > can contribute to capacity to have fun (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
20. Come out of real self > playfulness (1) (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
21. Work on self > ability to laugh at self (4) (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>

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<i>f) Contexts that can contribute to decreasing the availability of playfulness/humor</i>  (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)	1. Feel I should be able to do something I can't do > defensive / wound up > lose playfulness <b>(2)</b> (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neutrality (lack of)</li> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	2. Lose self > lose humor/playfulness <b>(4)</b> (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	3. Self-conscious > lose playfulness <b>(5)</b> (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	4. Lack of clarity about self/unsureness > seriousness <b>(1)</b> (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional distance</li> </ul>
	5. Responsibility > seriousness <b>(1, 4)</b> (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	6. Misunderstood > making a tremendous effort to be clear > serious <b>(4)</b> (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Climate/circuit</li> </ul>
	7. A lot at stake > hard to get loose > serious <b>(3)</b> (I/R)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking * less seriously</li> </ul>

*Note.* Processes do not indicate a causal relationship. The numbers in brackets indicate which participants contributed each process/set of processes. The letters in brackets indicate a process that is primarily focused on an individual (I), on a relationship (R), or both (I/R). The theme, “Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously” is represented by the text, “Taking \* less seriously.”

#### ***The emergence of subordinate process categories within the second category.***

During analysis of the second category, the processes did not seem to fall clearly into processes that were primarily focused on self or relationship. In fact, a large number of these processes seemed to focus on both an individual and a relationship, including many processes that generated playfulness out of an interaction involving the interplay between an individual and a relationship system. Thus, the processes in this group were separated into six categories, and then marked (I), (R), or (I/R) according to the primary/combined focused of the process.

The neutrality/objectivity category was fairly evenly split between focus on the individual and focus on the relationship. The acceptance category consisted entirely of processes that were more focused on the individual. The experience, anxiety management, emotional separateness, and contexts that can contribute to decreasing the

availability of play/humor category were all more focused on relationship. The categorization of a process as more individually focused is in no way meant to suggest that the process does not ultimately relate to a relationship process. The distinction is made to reflect the focus of the participants' observations, and may indicate something about the nuances of the function of play in the interaction between an individual and the system within which the individual exists.

Whereas the first superordinate category included subordinate categories that were all aspects of the five superordinate themes, the second category generated one unique category, experience, which was not included as a separate aspect of one of the five subordinate themes. This category includes the processes that involved experiencing something for a prolonged period, such as studying Bowen family systems theory, professional experience, and knowing somebody for a long time. The one exception is the final process, which involves being at the very beginning of a new relationship experience.

Not surprisingly, the categories that the participants described as being primarily generated by objectivity/neutrality and acceptance are all associated with the subordinate theme, neutral objectivity. However, the processes stemming from acceptance are more strongly associated with neutrality than objectivity. The category defined by emotional separateness within the system is associated most strongly with the theme emotional distance. With the exception of the experience category, the subordinate categories within this superordinate category were all aspects of the superordinate or subordinate themes:

- Experience
- Neutrality/Objectivity (Neutral Objectivity)

- Acceptance (Neutral Objectivity)
- Anxiety management (Emotional Climate/Circuit)
- Emotional separateness within the system (Emotional Distance)
- Creating a playful climate (Emotional Climate/Circuit)

The final category, contexts that can contribute to decreasing the availability of play/humor, contained seven items. The items were presented as a discrete group for clarity, but could also have been categorized under neutrality/objectivity, experience, and emotional separateness within the system. The following excerpts provide examples for the first five subordinate categories:

- Experience
  - I think seeing multi generations of families year after year .... it's really helped me to ... get more neutral about change, about symptoms, about the struggles people have, to see more of the patterns, to just... To take it all seriously but not too seriously
- Neutrality/Objectivity
  - Getting neutral about whatever it is really helps a lot with humor, because if you're not critical about what you're doing or what somebody else is doing or your reaction to them or any of that then. . . . I think there's a lot of room for humor.
- Acceptance
  - I think a lot of humor and being able to laugh at yourself has to do with accepting who you are and how you came to be and, also, finding ways to be honest with your foibles.



- Anxiety management
  - I occupied a playful position, functioning position, you might say, and I was no more autonomous than most of the others. And it was just an automatic reaction to a situation that I didn't really understand very well. But somehow sensed it was useful.
  - I've always understood that psychotherapy . . . It primarily is one more relationship in our lives, you know, and it might be a very specific one. . . . But it's just another relationship, and I know that the workplace comedian is... Well there's some research that indicates that, you know, workplaces with a comedian are less stressed than workplaces without one...
- Emotional separateness within the system
  - I think we know each other pretty well. I think we're enough removed that we're not really sensitive to one another.

***Contexts that can contribute to decreasing the availability of***

***playfulness/humor.*** The final subordinate category in this section includes the participants' descriptions of processes that take place in contexts that can contribute to decreasing the availability of playfulness/humor to an individual or system. There were seven examples of this process category. The first four processes relate to a lack of neutrality or objectivity, or to not being emotionally separate from the anxiety of the system. For example, one participant gave the following description of a family system described as "very serious":

They have, I think, a tendency to see themselves as better than everyone else. And I think that both of those extremes [referring to an aspect of another branch of the

family] have made these people way more serious than is helpful. That doesn't mean they can't have fun, and that sometimes being around one another isn't pleasant, but there's to me this underlying unsureness on the part of both families, which to me stems from a lack of clarity about self and also a suspicion about the rest of the world.

The other examples did not imply a lack of neutrality, and focused more on the context that made sense of the seriousness:

- I think [she] was among the most serious of her sisters. But she also had a hell of a lot of responsibility and they didn't, other than the children.
- I think early on I was just so serious, as I probably should've been then, about it all.

One of the participants also described the seriousness with which he sometimes takes I-positions as part of an intentional effort to differentiate a self. For example, he stated, "there were times ... when I realized you just need a clear calmness and I-position and delivering it sometimes with some emotion." These descriptions did not fit into any of the process categories because they were not components of processes generated by play/humor or producers of play/humor. However, the capacity to be intentionally serious that this participant described is the counterpart to the emotional flexibility described elsewhere.

**Combining themes and processes.** Table 7 illustrates the overlap between themes and processes. The experience process category does not clearly fit into any of the subordinate themes, and it did not feature frequently enough in the interviews to be categorized as a separate subordinate theme. However, the seven items within the

Table 7: *Themes and process categories combined*

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Process categories
<b>Neutral Objectivity</b>	Acceptance	<i>Neutrality/Objectivity</i> <i>Acceptance</i>
<b>Not taking oneself/others/situation too seriously</b>	Absurdity Looseness Seriousness	/
<b>Emotional Climate/Circuit</b>	Learning	<i>Creating a playful climate</i> <i>Anxiety Management</i> <i>Connection</i> <i>Contexts ↓ play/humor</i>
<b>Emotional Distance</b>	Emotional Closeness Emotional Separateness	<i>Staying outside the anxiety of the system</i> <i>Emotional separateness within the system</i>
<b>Changing Perspective</b>	Shift in emotion Shift in thinking	<i>Shift out of intense emotional response</i> <i>Shifting thinking</i>
/	/	<i>Experience</i>
/	/	<i>Focused primarily on the individual/system</i>
/	/	<i>Focused primarily on the system</i>

*Note.* The theme, “Contexts that can contribute to decreasing the availability of playfulness/humor” is represented by the text “Contexts ↓ play/humor.”

experience category did include aspects of each of the superordinate themes.

Additionally, the distinction between humor-generated processes that are focused more on the individual versus those that are focused more on the system permits a more nuanced way of thinking about the interaction between the different aspects of the themes. The fact that all the other process categories fit into the subordinate themes helps to verify that the themes are representative of the interviews.

**Spatial language.** At least once in every interview, the participant referred to an aspect of play or humor with language related to space/position. The following examples illustrate this [all italics added to emphasize the spatial language]:

- I’ve had to work very hard to get to *this place* [of objectivity and playfulness].
- Being able to go for the *platform* of acceptance then *led me down the path* of humor.

- Getting neutral about whatever it is really helps a lot with humor, because if you're not critical about what you're doing or what somebody else is doing or your reaction to them or any of that then I think you can... Then I think *there's a lot of room* for humor.
- Humor *takes it out of the ordinary frame* they have for whatever it is we're talking about.
- Part of humor, particularly in therapy or about things that we take seriously, allows us to... sort of to *have another perspective*.
- I try to get to *a point at some juncture where there's a space* for a little bit of lightness.
- If we can get a little bit *out of the depths* of a problem, by whatever means. Let's say it's humor.
- And so, it was sort of a tough *place to be* [referring to wanting to be taken seriously but afraid of being seen as frivolous if he was playful].

Additionally, one of the participants told a brief story in an attempt to communicate something about the idea of *the fine line* between humor and tragedy:

- Researcher: Is there anything else that has popped in your mind, just about the topic at all in terms of playfulness and humor that we have a touched on?

Interviewee: Just only how hard it is maybe to communicate that... How that fine line, as Bowen said, between humor and tragedy... And that humor used appropriately can help people *rise up* a bit out of the tragedy of the situation. I saw a man ... for a number of years and he used to refer to it as... He was explaining this theory to me and I'm trying to understand it. "Lately," he said, "I

think I feel *above the line*. My life has been lived *below the line*. But I think I have a glimmer of what you're getting at. Trying to..." He was a real serious, successful physician, but a lot of problems in his relationships with various people. Anyway... I don't know what else to add about it. It's just a hard thing to get across I guess to people.

This language is highlighted here because of the fact that many of the concepts in Bowen family systems theory are also suggestive of space, including position, and direction: triangles, transmission, projection, cutoff, fusion, sibling position, differentiation, togetherness, individuality etc. The spatial language of the participants related to play/humor seems to denote a sense of movement from one place to another. Given that Bowen family systems theory is grounded in evolutionary biology, it is interesting to consider how play and humor may relate to two of the basic survival processes related to movement: approach and withdraw.

### **Playfulness in the Supervisory System**

Having presented the themes and processes that emerged from analysis of the interviews, the following section includes examples of how the participants described experiences of play and humor in the supervisory system. This section also includes some clinical examples in which the participants described their experiences of play and humor while coaching clients. These examples are relevant to the current study due to the fact that clinicians whose work is grounded in Bowen family systems theory do not distinguish between the coaching role of a supervisor or a therapist (Schur, 2011).

**Playfulness/humor of participants' coaches.** The participants' descriptions of the playfulness/humor of their coaches illustrate some of the ways in which the themes

were expressed in the playfulness or lack of playfulness of their supervisors. Several of the participants described being coached by Murray Bowen himself. Their examples, which demonstrate a range of perceptions, illustrate seriousness, looseness, and not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously:

- Bowen had a great sense of humor.
- Researcher: How playful were your Bowen coaches?  
Interviewee: Most not very. Including Murray Bowen.... Who could be but was generally pretty serious and pushy and nudging.
- [Bowen] was very... Just very fun, and very loose.
- I think most people who knew him would say he was a playful, interesting, and serious minded guy. . . . I think among people who just saw him in the professional side and didn't have a lot of interactions with him, were less aware of that.
- I think what went on between us was pretty serious. He probably from time to time made some lighter comments about things that I was over-dramatizing—for lack of a better way of describing it—and that was helpful to me.

The participant who had personally experienced Bowen as fun and loose, suggested that one of the reasons for his seriousness was due to his focus on communicating theory:

In the end of his life he was pretty serious about making tremendous efforts to be clear about what he was saying. Because a lot of times people misunderstood what he was saying. So he was pretty serious and, you know, I don't remember a lot of laughter in the training program.

Another participant described an experience involving Bowen's playfulness that helped him to grasp a central aspect of theory related to emotional separateness. The participant described attending a coaching session with Bowen after returning from a trip to visit his family, in which he gave a 20-minute monologue about the trip before turning to Bowen:

He had this kind of smile on his face, and I said to myself, "what the hell is he smiling at? This ain't funny!" ... But then that freed me. I realized at that moment how incredibly anxious I had been ... without recognizing that. And the idea that you could be involved in a family system and outside the emotionality but present and accounted for is when I first appreciated that idea.

The participant explained that Bowen's capacity to listen to him in his intensity without getting caught up in it was very important to him. For this participant, Bowen's capacity to "live the theory" modeled how to remain connected to a system but outside the anxiety of the system.

The participants also described their experiences with other coaches. All six of the participants described being coached by someone who was playful or humorous. One person described how his coaches contributed to the learning environment by creating a playful climate:

I think there were coaches that were... able to get loose and be playful, and to be playful when, you know, if they were to be serious ... would not have been as effective, and their playfulness really helped everyone, sort of, relax and get loose about something which ordinarily [they] would not be as loose.

Another participant stated that her coach used humorous examples from his own life. She described laughing a lot with her coach: “You know, it would be these things... Just the recognition and the realization would be funny. Oh my god! There it is again!”

Another person stated that his coach reinforced his natural inclination toward humor and emphasized the value of using humor for bonding, calming people down, and creating connections. He said that whenever he approached her to discuss matters in his personal life, that at some point she would always say, “What about playfulness? Could you think of something playful that would help in the situation between you and...[the other person]” When the author asked, “Think of something playful in what sense?” he explained that his coach was pointing him toward a way of tackling the emotional process rather than the content of whatever was going on; to “replace the dead seriousness or cutoff that may have ensued in some particular situation that I was involved in.... Cutoff or difficulty. Tension. Conflict.”

**Playfulness/humor of supervisees.** The participants also gave examples of their own playfulness and humor as supervisees. One participant described how she thought about the development of playfulness in the Bowen community as a whole, which she attributed in part to emotional separateness. After originally describing the seriousness that she had experienced at the beginning of her training, she stated that in the Bowen network in general there is “an awful lot of playfulness.” When the author asked her about how this had developed out of the earlier seriousness she had experienced, she stated:

I think the people have really evolved. You know, they’ve become more sure of themselves. They’ve taken on greater responsibility for their own direction, their



own lives. They were all so very young. We were in our early 30s, the majority of us. And Bowen was in his.... late 60s when I met him.... I think it has to do with being able to separate some from him. And to embrace his ideas, if they make sense to you, and if you're able to validate them, in your life and in your work, but to also be more comfortable in your own skin and sure of yourself.

She went on to explain:

I really do think he was a central force and everything revolved around him, in the early days. And people were still trying to learn at his feet so to speak, but in 40 years they've all taken off in their own way and created their understanding of his thinking and how it applies to their lives.

Speaking of colleagues that she has now studied alongside for almost 30 years, she said, "We all know each other very, very well. And there's a huge amount of humor that plays out all the time between us."

Another participant described the Bowen center at one time as "top-heavy with oldests" who were not very playful. The participant described his attempt, early in his training, to fit in with this culture, but stated that he eventually recognized the effort was coming from pseudo self. He stated that he stopped trying to "fake being an oldest", and became more authentic with people at the Bowen center as well with the people in his clinical practice:

And, you know, becoming a bit more humorous was part of that.... If there's a way to communicate things ... in a funner, fun, more interesting way, I enjoyed that. So, I think I learn better that way too. And I think other people do as well.

The same participant described another struggle early on that illustrated the effort to not take oneself so seriously. He stated that as a naturally playful youngest he was worried about coming across as frivolous and not being taken seriously. He described attempting to present himself as more authoritative, but was told by his supervisor that he came across as too intense. He explained:

He used to say to me... “You need to work on making yourself small,” and part of that was also... when you are making yourself small, is to use humor and to...

And even self-deprecating humor is really good for that, you know, and he recommended that. He said ... find ways to laugh at yourself, you know, as a way to kind of blunt the edge of your intensity. And also kind of blunt the edge of being too serious about things. And that was really useful advice.

Providing an example of the role of experience, this participant pointed out that it can be difficult to make fun of yourself when you’re not comfortable in your own skin, and that it is often not easy for a young person to be self-deprecating. However, he stated that eventually, a little later in his career “I was able to kind of find my voice, if you will. And have it be a humorous one too.”

Some of the other participants described the role of gaining clinical experience as a factor in remaining playful. One person stated that his clinical experience helped him to be surer what he was seeing and to give him “conviction that this is a more accurate way to understand human behavior,” which he explained helped him to remain neutral and playful in the face of anxiety. Another participant stated:

I think seeing multi generations of families year after year [has] really helped me to kind of get more neutral about change, about symptoms, about the struggles

people have, to see more of the patterns, to just... To take it all seriously but not too seriously.

One of the participants described her experiences of losing and then regaining self in relation to her supervisor and colleagues. She explained that at the beginning of her training she was very playful:

I could sort of play with [her supervisor].... I mean this is when I was just spontaneous. I didn't know any better.... I could play a lot because I didn't know... I was just excited about what I was learning and I couldn't believe what I saw sometimes.

She explained the relationship context that was conducive to this experience:

You know in a new relationship you're very independent. You have a lot of yourself still in it. Then you get in a relationship and then the togetherness plays a part, and then you start to lose some of your self, and that becomes a problem. So I think at the beginning ... I was a pretty free bird.

She went on to describe how she experienced a period of time when she didn't manage herself well in relation to a professional emotional triangle, and that she lost the capacity to be playful and humorous. She stated:

I have never thought of that but when I just see this thing: you lose self and you lose humor. I mean, I think those two things go hand-in-hand. And when I was back in my original kind of response, my hardwiring to get confused by what others were saying, get kind of rattled.... I couldn't even think!

However, she stated that after getting clear about the emotional triangle she was participating in, she was able to emotionally separate herself and that the playfulness returned to her relationship with her supervisor.

Another person stated that his coach reinforced his natural inclination toward humor. He said that whenever he approached her to discuss matters in his personal life, that at some point she would always say, “What about playfulness? Could you think of something playful that would help in the situation between you and...[the other person]” When the author asked, “Think of something playful in what sense?” he explained that his coach was pointing him toward a way of tackling the emotional process rather than the content of whatever was going on; to “replace the dead seriousness or cutoff that may have ensued in some particular situation that I was involved in.... Cut off or difficulty. Tension. Conflict.”

**Coaching as a playful experience.** All the participants had significant experience as coaches, and in coaching other clinicians. The participant with the least experience had been a coach for 10 years, and the most experienced participant had been coaching for over 40 years. As previously stated, from the perspective of Bowen family systems theory, the role of therapist and supervisor are the same. Friedman (2000a) states that the roles of supervisor and therapist are indistinguishable, and that supervision, like therapy, involves the dual focus of teaching a specific way of thinking and on the differentiation of self. Schur (2011) explains that both roles are focused on the same goals of coaching someone toward developing more objectivity towards family and making efforts to differentiate self. Thus, the examples in the following sections include some descriptions that involve coaching clinicians, and others that involve coaching clients.

One of the participants stated that she had originally been very serious but that over the years she had become much more playful, to the extent that she almost didn't recognize herself. However, she pointed out that her humor and playfulness were grounded in the openness and authenticity that she had developed through her efforts to apply Bowen family systems theory:

Interviewee: I don't go into a situation thinking, 'Boy I need to be funny and if I can that would be helpful'. It just happens.

Researcher: So it's a spontaneous thing that you're experiencing.

I: It's a very organic process. Yes.

Describing her approach to the training program that she created 10 years ago she stated:

It is so, so different than it was in the early years. I really have no hesitation in saying exactly what I think. And that doesn't mean I'm right but it means I know what I think. And then, you know, if that's helpful to someone else they'll figure it out and maybe they'll implement it in some way into their own lives. Or maybe not!

She described how her role in creating a playful climate seemed to influence the process of supervision:

Researcher: How do you think that your playfulness and humor contributes to the learning of your students?

Interviewee: Well my impression is that it's really helpful. I think they are able to take themselves less seriously while at the same time taking what they're trying to get done more seriously. In other words I think it creates some room to calm

down about yourself; to calm down about whatever the circumstances may be, and yet to continue to be very thoughtful in trying to figure some things out.

Another participant discussed his thoughts on the spontaneity of play from a Bowen family systems lens:

Researcher: How do you think about the spontaneity of play when you're operating from this theoretical perspective?

Interviewee: Very much the way I would think about the syntax of a sentence. I lean towards certain syntactical constructions. But no matter how I'm saying what I'm saying, no matter how I'm presenting what I am presenting, being it with humor or without, I am always thinking theory. So I am not only spontaneous. The humor is spontaneous in that it relates to something that's going on in the moment but it's not just spontaneous humor... It's no more spontaneous that is one's utterance of a sentence. It's thought about, it's considered. There are times I think of something that I think we—both the client and I—would get a huge laugh out of, but I don't want to divert what's been going on for the last few minutes of the client moving towards a better way of thinking about something. If the client's moving toward understanding their part in a pattern with somebody else or something, I'm not going to interrupt that with humor. So it's not like humor ... trumps everything, but it can certainly be a useful tool.

He explained that making the choice to use humor related to the lowering of anxiety and reengaging the intellect:

Researcher: When you are now supervising trainees, how do you think about it?

Interviewee: I don't sit and say, "I'm now going to do a funny intervention." Things occur to me, and I decide whether to say them or not.... But I always think... I always think it's useful to lower anxiety. Bowen talked about two concomitant goals of therapy. The first being lowering anxiety and the second being pulling up differentiation. I don't know that humor is going to pull up one's differentiation.... but I really do believe that lightening the moment gives us the ability to reengage the intellect and be, again, a bit less overwhelmed.

The participants all described the enjoyment they experienced in their coaching work, as the following person explained.

Researcher: So, when you think about your experience of playfulness and humor at the beginning of your career compared to now, what do you observe?

Interviewee: Well one thing now is I enjoy myself and all the sessions I have with people. And I laugh a lot. And I laugh as part of my relationship with people but I think it's also part of my joy of the work. As much as I ... think therapy is really serious and it's hard work, it's also interesting and fun and... It's fun to be playful with it.

This participant described how his shift in thinking about change had helped him to become more playful:

One of the things that's been important to me is, to make therapy a lot less about change and much more about just acceptance of who I am, who we are, who my clients are. And that there's a lot one can do by not changing and by simply, you know, learning to live with life as it is. Without this extraordinary pressure of

trying to be in charge, in control, on top of things. And I think that's really freed me to be a lot more playful.

Another participant stated, "as a therapist [I] find a lot of humor in what people are saying....I know that I have a very good time laughing with clients," and she described sharing humorous stories about herself in her work:

I can see the humor... I use myself in my clinical work. You know, you have to be super careful about how you do that but, I find that.... If somebody brings up something and it's something that I have dealt with in myself I could somehow use that... Use me and be humorous about it, which can also evoke humor in the other.... And, you know, I can say... It's tricky. I don't do it all the time and, you know, it has to sort of work out. But there certainly are times, you know, when it's really good... Where it really sort of helps.

One participant stated that he had "decided to really tack toward humor" in his work, and that this had been "somewhat by necessity" due to the population he was working with. He explained that his clients were "deadly serious," and that "I just found there's got to be a way... A more... humorous way of kind of getting people to lighten."

Another participant stated, "I'm pretty consistently playful," but he explained that there were occasionally circumstances in which he could lose access to his playfulness. This was illustrated by two stories about his work with a client. In the first example (included in a previous section) he responded to her intense emotion and seriousness with a very playful comment that transformed the conversation. In the second story, he described responding to her seriousness without playfulness:

Researcher: How would you describe the difference in you in those two



moments?

Interviewee: Probably something about over functioning. The degree to which I feel compelled to help.... And my own discomfort; that I was probably frustrated at not being able to change her in that moment....

Researcher: If you look back would you say that you've noticed ... that there are times that you were uncomfortable along those lines that it makes it harder for you to play, for you to use humor?

Interviewee: Oh sure! Yeah! There are times it wouldn't even occur to me. When I start getting defensive, which has happened on occasion. When I start getting really wound up thinking there's something I need to be able to do that I don't know how to do right now. Yeah I can... I can lose my playfulness pretty quickly.

**Ways that play/humor emerge as part of the coaching process.** The participants described a variety of ways in which play/humor emerged as part of the coaching process. As already described, although all the participants described their playfulness as being grounded in theory, some participants experienced humor and play more spontaneously, whereas others used humor and play with more calculated intent. The following examples illustrate how some of the participants set out to integrate humor into their sessions. One participant stated,

I always start out with a smile on my face. Even though I know the clients come there for very serious reasons. And I always, in kind of, telling a couple of little housekeeping things.... I always try to throw a little bit of humor in there just to let them know who they're dealing with in terms of my inclination toward

keeping things relatively lighter even though we might move into tremendous depth on their issues.

Another participant stated, “I was always interested in.... how do you take something that people, you know take so serious and find humor?” He described what he saw as the right emotional climate for using humor with his clients, and especially for teasing them. For example, he emphasized the importance of being personally loose about the issue being discussed, and doing the necessary emotional work on himself that would allow him to be neutral about it. He also described the kind of relationship that is conducive to using humor effectively:

I have to be.... in a kind of relationship with the client that they won't feel shamed or mocked. Because they that know I've connected with them in a way that I would not say something which if said by a stranger they may take as shaming or being mocked, but from me in that moment they would hear it as someone who they trust and feel connected with who is trying to push them to see the absurdity in what they're saying or doing.

He also explained that it was important to have good timing and to pick the right issue in the moment to treat with humor:

So, you know sometimes it requires my client being the straight man and, sort of, I am in the joking position. Sometimes it requires ... a pause in making sure that ... the delivery's right. So ... if it's absurdity they kind of know that what I am saying is absurd.... I'm not making a truthful statement but something that ... is clearly and obviously ... exaggerated.

Several participants described the use of absurdity, exaggeration, and reversals.

One participant explained Bowen's use of reversals, which involved, "saying the opposite of what you really mean in a way that would lighten the situation." He gave an example of a woman who usually called her daughter and left messages saying, "I haven't heard from you. I hope you're all right!" He explained that she eventually realized that she was conveying her anxiety, "So the next call... she ... said, 'I haven't heard from you! But I just wanted you to know I'm doing fine here.' He suggested that this was an effective tactic for the mother, because it wasn't guilt inducing: "The emotion wasn't there. A lot is in the delivery, the tone of voice I think, and the smile that can go with it. It helps people realize that you're outside the system rather than being critical."

### **Participant Representation.**

The participants contributed fairly evenly to the themes (see Table 8). Every superordinate theme was derived from comments from all six participants. At least five participants contributed to every subordinate theme, and five out of the nine subordinate themes had contributions from every participant. Three of the participants contributed to every theme, two of the participants contributed to 11 out of the 12 total themes, and one person contributed to 10 themes.

The process categories were created and audited using a process in which the author attempted to identify and categorize every process related to play/humor that the participants described. The level of detail about proportional contribution to the process categories is therefore more detailed (see Table 9). Every process category received contributions from at least 50% of the participants, and most of the categories received contributions from at least 67% of the participants. Five of the six participants contributed a fairly even number of processes to the total number, ranging between

Table 8: *Participant contributions to themes*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	% of participants contributing to theme
<b>Neutral Objectivity</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Acceptance	x	x	x	x	x	o	83%
<b>Taking * Less Seriously</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Absurdity	x	x	x	x	x	o	83%
Looseness	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Seriousness	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
<b>Emotional Climate/Circuit</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Learning	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
<b>Emotional Distance</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Emotional Closeness	x	x	x	x	o	x	83%
Emotional Separateness	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
<b>Changing Perspective</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Shift in emotion	x	x	x	x	x	x	100%
Shift in thinking	x	x	x	o	x	x	83%
Percentage of themes contributed to by participant	100%	100%	100%	92%	92%	83%	

*Note.* Items in bold are superordinate themes. The theme, “Not taking oneself/others/the situation too seriously” is represented by the text, “Taking \* Less Seriously.”

16-20% of the total. However, one participant (5) contributed only 10% of the total number of processes. Similarly, four out of the six participants contributed to at least 73% of the process categories, one contributed to 64%, and one person contributed to only 55%.

One of the participants (4) provided only one example in the first subordinate category: ways in which play/humor can contribute to generating aspects of the five

Table 9: Participant contributions to processes

		1	2	3	4	5	6	% of participants contributing to category
<i>Category 1</i>								
<i>Indiv</i>	Shifting Emotion	1	7	2	1	1	2	100%
	Shifting Thinking	0	4	4	0	1	0	50%
<i>Rel.</i>	Connection	2	3	2	0	3	1	83%
	Staying Outside Anx	0	2	1	0	1	4	67%
	Playful Climate	1	1	1	0	0	1	67%
<i>Category 2</i>								
Experience		2	0	2	1	0	2	67%
Neutrality/Objectivity		1	0	0	4	1	4	67%
Anxiety Management		1	0	2	3	1	0	67%
Emotional Closeness		1	1	0	0	1	1	67%
Emotional Separateness w/in Sys.		9	0	1	6	0	5	67%
Contexts ↓ play/humor		2	1	1	3	1	0	83%
Percentage of process categories contributed to by participant		82%	64%	82%	55%	73%	73%	
Percentage of total processes contributed by participant		20%	19%	16%	18%	10%	20%	

*Note.* Items in bold are superordinate themes. The theme, “Contexts that can contribute to decreasing availability of play/humor” is represented by the text “Contexts ↓ play/humor.”

superordinate themes. Another participant (2) provided only two examples in the second category: processes that can contribute to increasing/decreasing the availability of play/humor. This participant provided half the examples related to the individually focused category, and half the examples related to a shift in thinking. This suggests that participant four was chiefly focused on processes that contributed to the availability of play/humor, and that the second participant was primarily focused on the ways in which play and humor can contribute to the other things, especially a shift in thinking.

Additionally, one participant (1) provided 43% of the processes in the category related to emotional separateness from the system. These nine processes made up 45% of this participant's total contributions, suggesting that this participant was particularly focused on the topic of play/humor in relation to emotional separateness from the system.

The individual variation visible at this level of analysis is indicative of the differences in the degree to which each participant focused on different ideas and experiences. However, the variation also reflects differences in the interviewees' personalities, speaking style and how they responded to the interview questions at the time. For example, some participants provided more concept-rich theoretical answers, some told more anecdotes, some spoke more than others, and some covered a wider range of ideas than others.

### **Summary**

This study utilized IPA methodology to investigate the relationship between play and the process of learning Bowen family systems theory. The study involved six people who all had substantial experience both as students and teachers of Bowen family systems theory, as well as extensive experience as practicing clinicians. Each participant was interviewed for between 50-75 minutes, using a semi-structured interview format.

The author focused each interview on the participants' experience of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in four areas:

- General life experience
- Family of origin
- Clinical training
- Clinical work

Five superordinate themes and nine subordinate themes emerged from the data (see Table 3) along with three process categories and 13 subordinate process categories (see Tables 4, 5, and 6). The process categories served to further elucidate aspects of the previously identified themes, and revealed three categories that had not emerged during the earlier analysis: experience, focus on the individual, and focus on the system. All the themes were derived from contributions from at least five participants, and most of the themes were derived from contributions from all six participants (see Table 8). All of the processes were derived from contributions from at least 50% of the participants, and 90% of the processes were derived from at least 67% of the participants (see Table 9).

The findings of the research suggest that through the lens of Bowen family systems theory, play, playfulness, and humor can be understood to be expressions of the emotional process, and thus may function as manifestations of togetherness or individuality. The themes that emerged during the analysis suggest that neutrality; not taking oneself, others, or the situation too seriously; the emotional climate/circuit; emotional distance; and changing perspective are all significant factors in the expression of play. These factors can operate by contributing to the conditions that increase/decrease the availability play in a system; or play can contribute to creating the conditions from which they emerge. These findings are discussed in more detail in the final chapter

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study explored the function of play through the lens of Bowen family systems theory, with a focus on the role of play in the training process of students of Bowen family systems theory. Due to the limited research on play, playfulness, and humor as an aspect of psychotherapy and psychotherapy training, and the sparse literature on play, playfulness and humor in relation to studying Bowen family systems theory, this study was intended as an exploratory inquiry. The author was drawn to the topic for several reasons, not least because she is a very playful person, but also because she has had so many pivotal experiences related to playfulness—or lack of playfulness—in her own training, and in her efforts to study and apply Bowen family systems theory. Central to these experiences was her relationship with a very playful Bowenian supervisor.

Several years after beginning to study Bowen family systems theory, the author started to notice that playfulness and humor were becoming accessible to her in emotional contexts that would previously have inhibited play. These moments opened up possibilities for—and/or the possibilities for these moments were opened up by—small changes in her most important relationships. These small changes have made a huge difference in her life, and have profoundly shaped her clinical work. Thus, it is with great appreciation and love that she has begun studying this phenomenon.

### **This Study in the Context of Existing Literature**

**Standing on the shoulders of rats.** Bowen family systems theory seeks to understand the human emotional system as a manifestation of life processes that are millions of years old (Kerr, 1998). Thus, the author sought to place this particular study of playfulness in the context of an emerging evolutionary biological understanding of the



evolution and function of play and humor in nonhuman animals and early humans. This provided a fascinating basis to hypothesize about how the function of play in the supervisory relationship could be understood in terms of millions of years of evolution. In particular, the author drew the reader's attention to the following points, as described by Pellis and Pellis (2013):

1. The ways in which play serves as a mechanism for anxiety management by helping to:
  - a. Reduce stress through the physiological calming effects of play.
  - b. Negotiate the complexities of living in a social system by offering a means of exchanging information about and adapting to the social structure of the group.
2. The ways in which play can offer a means to emotionally calibrate, producing individuals that are more resilient and better able to utilize their physical, social, and cognitive skills during stressful situations.
3. The evolution of neural modifications of the emotional regulatory systems of species with complex play behaviors, which allow the individuals in those species to “sustain more frequent and prolonged interactions while still maintaining a playful mood” (p. 48).

The findings of the current study are consistent with these ideas in a number of ways. For example, the emotional climate/circuit theme in part refers to the ways in which the participants observed the use of play and humor to manage the anxiety of relationship systems. This included the use of play/humor in managing stress, bonding, creating culture, and as a form of togetherness. Similarly, the not taking oneself, others,

or the situation too seriously theme included the participants' descriptions of how seeing the absurdity in a situation and staying loose about it could be helpful in managing stress and social discomfort. Furthermore, the subordinate theme of emotional closeness was partly drawn from examples of the participants' descriptions of how they understood the role of humor in maintaining connected relationships. Strikingly, the many examples of teasing strongly parallel the play fighting of nonhuman animals.

The three remaining superordinate themes, neutral objectivity, emotional distance, and changing perspective, all offer examples of how the use of play and humor can help individuals to emotionally calibrate in relation to the emotional process. The participants' explanations suggest that the interplay between neutrality, objectivity, and playfulness can offer a path to becoming more accepting and less reactive to one's life, and that this can make it possible to develop more emotional independence from other individuals whilst still remaining connected to them. The changing perspective theme delineates some of the ways in which this interpersonal differentiation is made possible through the intrapersonal experience of emotionally calming down and seeing things with more perspective. Additionally, the emotional climate/circuit theme describes some of the ways in which a playful climate can help to promote learning.

The author has hypothesized about the parallel between the neural modifications of the emotional regulatory systems that occur in the evolution of a species with complex playful behaviors, and the development of emotional regulation on the part of a student of Bowen family systems theory. Of course, the parallel is not exact, because the brain of the student is not undergoing changes equivalent to the evolution of a brain structure taking place over millions of years of development. The comparison hypothesizes that in

each case, the development of mechanisms that enable complex play behaviors 1) requires moderation of the emotional regulation system, and 2) creates the possibility for individuals to remain playful while maintaining sustained social contact. This seems to reflect the experiences of the participants, all of whom spent decades developing greater emotional neutrality, emotional separateness from the emotional system, and taking greater responsibility for their own emotional regulation. For each participant, play and humor seem to have played a significant role in this process.

**Support for previous literature on play and humor in supervision.** The findings of this study support some of the findings of the limited number of existing studies related to play and humor in clinical and supervisory contexts. As previously discussed, the majority of these studies were focused specifically on the use of humor. In the current study, most of the participants described the increased use of humor and playfulness in their work, which is consistent with one aspect of Worthington's (1984) finding that more seasoned supervisors used humor more frequently than those with less experience. One of the participants also connected her increased playfulness to a lack of burnout, which supports the finding by Kramen-Kahn and Hansen (1998), who found that maintaining a sense of humor was the most endorsed item in the category of career-sustaining behaviors. Also, the participants' identification of multiple functions of play and humor correspond with the findings of a study by Hutchby and Dart (2019), that identified three types of laughter in the context of group supervision.

The participants' descriptions of the role of playfulness and humor in maintaining connected clinical relationships are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Friedman, 2017; Megdell, 1984; Panichelli et al., 2018). The findings of the current study also

reflect the results of a study by Worthington and Roehlke (1979), who found that supervisors' use of humor seemed indicative of a good relationship and was significantly correlated with supervisee satisfaction. Similarly, the participants' descriptions of the importance of a trusting, connected relationship when utilizing humor in a clinical relationship, are consistent with Goodman's (2018) investigation into the interaction between humor and trauma, in which Goodman found that the therapeutic effects of humor were most beneficial when the depth of the therapeutic relationship and the quality of the humorous interaction were aligned.

The findings that play and humor can contribute to taking a different perspective, to gaining emotional separateness, and to resilience, are consistent with some of the conclusions of Guitard et al. (2005), who suggested that playfulness enables adults "to obtain distance from self, others, situations, and conventions to approach situations with an open mind; to find original and novel solutions to problems; and to better face and accept difficulties, failure, and adversity" (p. 21). The findings are also consistent with Friedman's (2017) finding that therapists working with adolescents used humor to help them gain perspective.

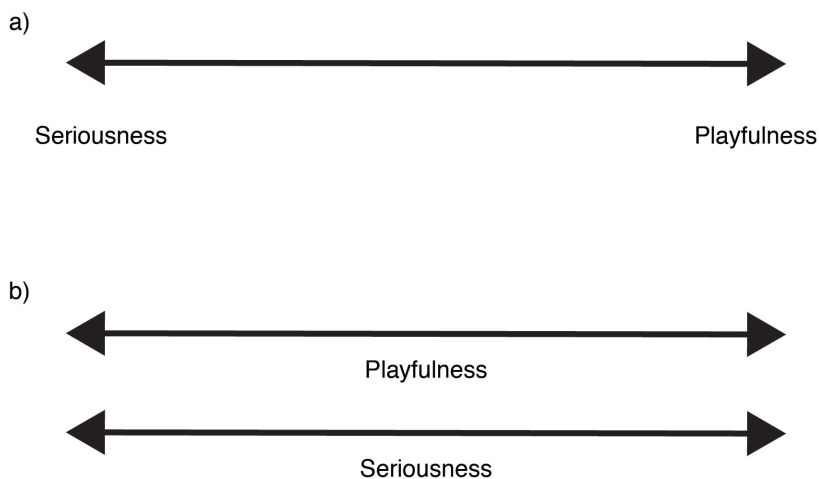
**Expanding on previous literature.** The findings of this study offer new ways of thinking about the findings of several previous studies. For example, Killinger (1987) studied the effectiveness of humorous interventions made by therapists at two university clinics. They found that clients were significantly less likely to engage in exploration and understanding after comments that elicited laughter in the client. This is quite different from the self-reports of the participants of this study, and raises questions about what

might be different about the use of humor in each group. Obvious possibilities include age, experience, context, and theoretical orientation.

Yonatan-Leus et al. (2018) found that self-effacing, affiliative, and self-defeating humor styles were found to be insignificant predictors of therapists' effectiveness, but that an aggressive humor style was a significant negative predictor of symptom change. Yonatan-Leus et al. propose that the effectiveness of an aggressive humor style might be partly to do with the therapist taking an approach that is respectful of clients' efforts to avoid discomfort whilst also recognizing that effective treatment inevitably involves a certain amount of pain. The participants in the current study report that they have experienced the effectiveness of a variety of styles of humor, including humor that is self-effacing and humor that involves teasing. Based on the findings of the current study, it seems likely that there are different kinds of humor that may be more or less organized by togetherness and individuality, and that when humor of any kind is grounded in neutrality and emotional separateness it is likely to have different results than when it is more automatically triggered. Furthermore, because the findings of the current study point to the systemic nature of play and humor, it is important to consider the relational factors that influence humor style.

Finally, Barnett (2007) points out that playfulness is often defined as being the opposite of seriousness. However, he states that in tests designed to refine playfulness measures, seriousness did not consistently arise as a descriptor. The participants in this study described the phenomenon of emotional flexibility as the freedom to be both serious and light. This raises questions about whether it is more accurate to conceptualize

seriousness and playfulness as operating on a continuum, or as two separate continuums (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3:* Different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between playfulness and seriousness. Diagram a) depicts seriousness and playfulness as two ends of a binary continuum, whereas diagram b) depicts seriousness and playfulness as existing on two separate continuums.

### **Reflections on the Findings**

**Play as a systemic phenomenon.** The findings of this study point to the systemic nature of play, including the observation that the playfulness of individuals is to some extent determined by their emotional context, and the observation that the playfulness of specific members of a system can significantly increase or decrease playfulness in the rest of the system. Therefore, even though there is a lot of variation in the playfulness and humorousness of different individuals that can remain relatively stable across different contexts, it makes sense to conceptualize play and humor not simply as individual traits,

but as traits that emerge and are maintained—or inhibited—within systems. Additionally, the findings of the study suggest that the efforts of a single individual can increase the availability of playfulness and humor to both the individual and the system.

The findings of the study suggest that neutrality; not taking oneself, others, or the situation too seriously; the emotional climate/circuit; emotional distance; and changing perspective are significant factors in the expression of play. The findings also suggest that aspects of these themes can contribute to contexts that are conducive or inhibiting to the emergence of play, and that play can contribute to contexts that are conducive or inhibiting to the emergence of aspects of these themes.

**The interplay between play neutrality/objectivity.** The participants repeatedly described the development of neutrality and objectivity as significant factors in the capacity to be playful and to not take oneself, others, and one's situation too seriously. The playfulness that emerged as a part of this process was often described as being governed by emotional separateness, and provided a means of communicating one's neutrality and separateness to others in the emotional system. The participants' had repeatedly experienced that the transmission of this neutrality had a calming effect on the system. Nevertheless, it was noted that playfulness was only one way of communicating neutrality to others, and that emotional flexibility involved the capacity to move between seriousness and playfulness.

The participants also described ways in which play and humor could help people to develop objectivity and neutrality. This often involved becoming more accepting, and being able to take emotionally uncomfortable things less seriously. Sometimes this involved being able to recognize and laugh at the absurdity of the human condition and

how the emotional process shapes our behaviors. The participants identified how this process could help people to shift out of intense negative emotional responses, and get looser about things that they had previously been uptight about. They described how this created the possibility to gain a new perspective on things, and in particular to be able to see one's part in a relationship process.

**Play and the emotional climate of a system.** The participants noted that different emotional contexts could influence the emergence of playfulness in a system. For example, they described how individuals within a system could take up a functional playful position as a way of managing the anxiety of the system. The findings suggest that the playfulness and seriousness of individuals in a system exist in relation to one another, such that one person's seriousness influences the development of another person's playfulness. This could be seen in the relative playfulness of siblings depending on their functional position in the family, and the relative playfulness of each member of a couple.

The findings of the study suggest how a playful climate can be conducive to learning. The participants described the ways in which a playful climate can promote interest, the desire to learn, curiosity, calmness, seriousness about the effort, thoughtfulness, and engagement of the intellectual system. The findings of the study suggest that the person in a leadership position within a system can significantly influence the playfulness of the whole system. The participants observed that the effects of playfulness on a system could include increased bonding, a sense of shared culture, and greater togetherness. The participants identified teasing as a form of play that often developed in response to emotional closeness.



The participants noted that certain emotional climates and contexts could be inhibiting to playfulness. These included situations in which there was a lot at stake, situations in which people bore a lot of responsibility, and situations in which individuals lost self to a relationship system. The participants noted that it was possible to maintain the capacity to be playful in such contexts, and that doing so often required maintaining emotional separateness while remaining present and accountable to the system. The participants stated that their efforts to apply Bowen family systems theory in their lives had contributed significantly to their ability to do this, and explained that being able to understand the functioning of a system had made it possible to take it less seriously and to be much looser in response to it.

**Play and individual/relationship functioning.** The findings suggest that play and humor can be transmitted around an emotional circuit, and that the process of this transmission sometimes focuses primarily/initially on relationship functioning and sometimes on individual functioning. For example, in a clinical context the humor shared by a therapist and a client could involve the therapist's desire to be liked by the client, in which case the primary focus of the humor would be on influencing the relationship system. Alternatively, the humor shared by a therapist and client could help the client to loosen up about a difficult subject, and rebalance his emotional and intellectual functioning, allowing him to calm down and gain a new perspective. In this case, the primary focus of the humor would be primarily intrapersonal.

Obviously these examples are tremendously oversimplified, and a systems perspective makes it possible to see that both cases involve the emotional processes of two individuals embedded within the emotional processes of multiple intersecting

relationship systems. Thus, the findings do not suggest that some forms of play are individual and others are systemic—this makes no sense from a systems perspective, which views the functioning of an individual as always to some extent organized by the systems within which she is embedded. However, there are nuances to the ways that playfulness—or anything else—moves around the circuit of an emotional system, and these nuances might be better understood through future research. The observations of the participants suggest that play and humor can help to generate shifts in an individual's perspective that can help to shape the social functioning of that individual within an emotional system.

**Relevance to students of Bowen family systems and their coaches/supervisors.** The participants noted that gaining experience—both in terms of their personal development as students of Bowen family systems theory, and as professionals gaining experience in their fields—had influenced their increased capacity to be playful. For example, the participants noted how much harder it can be to take oneself less seriously as a younger person, and/or when one feels insecure in one's role or even in one's own skin. These observations are particularly relevant to the central questions of this study, which seeks to understand the processes by which playfulness becomes available to a person studying Bowen family systems theory, and how play and humor function throughout the process.

As described above, the findings of this study outline some of the ways that play and humor can function in the development of increased objectivity and neutrality, which are significant factors in the effort to differentiate a self. The findings also indicate some of the ways in which play and humor can operate as manifestations of the automatic

functioning of the emotional system. These findings may help students of Bowen family systems theory become better observers of play and humor as manifestations of the personal and professional emotional systems within which they are embedded, and to pay attention to the processes involved in the emergence and/or inhibition of play and humor in those emotional systems.

The author could not be more grateful for the opportunity to have spent countless hours of immersion in the stories and reflections of the participants of this study. Gaining a better understanding of their experiences has helped her to better observe and understand her own playfulness. It has been especially helpful in refining her use of play and humor in her clinical practice, as well as in her personal relationships. The application of Bowen family systems theory involves becoming more conscious and more intentional about one's responses to other people. Because play and humor are so ubiquitous in human relationships, there is a lot to be learned from paying attention to their presence and their absence. The author hopes that she has at least shone a light on an area that people will find rewarding and useful—and even fun—to think about more.

The following questions suggest ways that clinicians and coaches might be curious about playfulness in their supervisory and clinical systems:

- What are the functions of this therapist's/client's playfulness in therapy/supervision?
- How does the playfulness of this therapist/client influence the other people involved, and how are the other people influencing the playfulness of this therapist/client?

- How is my playfulness/seriousness influencing the emotional climate of this system? How is the emotional climate of this system influencing my playfulness/seriousness?
- With which clients/therapists/supervisors do I experience more or less emotional flexibility? What might be influencing that?
- What would it take to get more playful with this therapist/client/supervisor? What would it take to be less automatically playful with this therapist/client/supervisor?
- How is my playfulness or lack of playfulness related to the emotional system in my family?
- How can I understand this person's playfulness as an adaptive strategy?
- How intentional is my playfulness? How spontaneous is my playfulness? What does this tell me about my functioning?
- How much emotional flexibility does this therapist/client have about this topic?
- How much emotional flexibility do I have about the topic coming up in this session? What work do I need to do to become a bit looser about this topic?
- How could my lightness/seriousness about this topic shape the learning experience for this therapist/client?
- What does my playful functioning indicate about my level of emotional separateness from this therapist/client/supervisor?
- How might the introduction of playfulness influence the emotional process between this therapist/client/supervisor and myself? How might the introduction of playfulness influence the emotional process between these therapists/clients?
- What is this therapist's/client's capacity to laugh at him/herself?

- What is my capacity to laugh at myself? How do I understand the factors that promote or inhibit being able to laugh at myself?

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One of the most important facets of this study was the fact that the six participants were senior members of the Bowen community with extensive knowledge of Bowen family systems theory and its application. Each participant had spent decades studying the theory and examining the workings of the emotional system in their own lives. This meant that their responses to the author's questions were grounded in decades of thoughtful reflection. Furthermore, three of the participants described having put a lot of thought into the use of humor in their coaching practices. As highly experienced professionals, the participants also have the benefit of having experienced supervision from the perspective of both trainees and supervisors. As students of Bowen family systems theory, coaching can be a lifelong process, and some of the participants were able to make contributions based on ongoing relationships with their coaches.

The homogeneity of the sample can also be seen as a strength. Smith and Osborn (2004) note that IPA researchers generally seek a closely defined group and then report in detail about that particular group. They state that the generalizability of the study can be theoretical rather than empirical, in which case the readers are able to link the findings to their own experiences and the existing literature. Thus, according to Smith and Osborn the power of an IPA study can be "judged by the light it sheds within the broader context" (p. 56). Because the reflections of the six participants were made and then interpreted from the perspective of a theoretical position that seeks to understand individual human behavior in the context of universal life processes, it is possible that the

findings are particularly suitable for generalizing to a broader context. Furthermore, the topic of investigation is a universal experience insofar as the entire species engages in play and humor. Thus, the study can be seen to have wide-ranging relevance.

A basic strength of the study is that it shines a light on a phenomenon that has barely been studied. Adult playfulness has received little research attention (Proyer, 2017), and the playfulness of therapists seems to be almost completely missing from the literature. Although the humor of therapists has received slightly more attention, the current research is extremely limited and has produced mixed results (Martin & Ford, 2018). Additionally, most research into systemic supervision has been conducted in university settings, which is not fully representative of the many settings in which supervision takes place (Breunlin et al., 2014), and at the time of writing there seems to be no research at all into the playfulness of supervisors or supervisees, and only two studies into the humor of supervisors (Worthington, 1984; Worthington & Roehlke, 1979).

Given the dearth of literature regarding play and humor in therapy and supervision, and especially the lack of research that looks at play and humor through the lens of Bowen family systems theory, the author took a fairly broad approach to the topic. This meant that the interviews covered a lot of ground, including the participants' general understandings of play and humor, as well as their experiences in clinical, supervisory, and family contexts. This approach is both a strength and a limitation of the study. The benefit of covering so much material is that the findings relate to a broad range of topics, many of which have previously received very little research attention. Furthermore, exploring the function of play and humor in multiple contexts creates the opportunity to

consider the contexts in relation to one another. However, a limitation of a broad approach is that it inevitably restricts the depth of examination possible regarding any one aspect of the topic.

Another limitation of the study is—however clichéd—also the other side of the coin of one of its strengths. The fact that the participants have all studied Bowen family systems theory for decades means that they have a very distant perspective on their early training experiences. Although this means they have the benefit of years of reflection and development to see their early training experiences from the perspective of seasoned practitioners and scholars, it also means that these reflections are unlikely to fully capture many of the thoughts and feelings they went through at the time. Furthermore, a study by Yarnal and Qian (2011) found that the playfulness of older adults may be different to that of younger adults. Based on their findings, the researchers stated that older adults may have learned “playfulness regulation” (p. 72). This is particularly relevant to the current study and suggests that further research is necessary to explore the experiences of younger clinicians.

The diversity of the participants is limited in other ways. For this particular study the author was interested in examining the ideas of people who had trained in Bowen family systems theory, but this means that the descriptions of the participants were filtered to some extent through the same theoretical framework. Future studies could use the lens of Bowen family systems theory to interpret the data, but the data could be collected from clinicians whose work is grounded in other theoretical frameworks. Finally, the diversity of the sample was not particularly culturally diverse. Despite attempts to find participants from other countries and other states, the final sample was a

predominantly white group of clinicians from the east coast. Future research would benefit from the inclusion of a more diverse ethnic and cultural sample.

Finally, although the author set out to study play and humor in general, several of the participants focused heavily on humor. Humor is a type of play, and one of particular relevance to this study given the emerging research on play fighting in non-human animals and the theory that an earlier form of physical play fighting may have evolved into a humor (Pellis & Pellis, 2013, pp. 142-144). However, there are other forms of play that were not addressed by the participants. Future studies could focus more specifically on aspects of playfulness such as creativity, curiosity, pleasure, and spontaneity as identified by Guitard et al. (2005)

### **Future Research**

There are numerous ways in which future research could investigate the functions of play in Bowen family systems theory training and related areas. As already suggested, the cultural, professional, and theoretical backgrounds of the participants could be much more diverse in future studies, or different studies could focus on different demographic groups. Similar studies could also be conducted with trainees who are younger, and/or who began their training much more recently.

The focus of future studies could also be much more narrow, with the goal of exploring the supervision process solely from the perspective of trainees or of supervisors. The participants in this study all described themselves as having always been very playful/humorous, or having become very playful/humorous through their work on differentiation of self. Future studies could look at the experiences of trainees and/or supervisors who do not identify as playful or humorous, or who believe they have



become less playful/humorous. Additionally, future studies might explore what other factors in training contribute to the development of playfulness in trainees, and to a playful training climate.

A rich area for future research is the study of play, playfulness and humor throughout other areas of clinical practice. The parallels between supervision and therapy from the perspective of Bowen family systems theory suggest that this study has significant relevance to the therapy process, given that coaching is seen as the same process in both cases (Friedman, 2000a). Even for clinicians who do not hold this view, there are many ways to think about playfulness in the supervisory system in relation to the clinical system. For example, Lee and Everett (2004) describe isomorphism within supervision as “the process whereby the dynamics of the relationship between the supervisor candidate and the supervisor trainee may mirror similar dynamics that are present between the trainee and the clinical family” (p. 34), and emphasize that both the structure and content of each subsystem are recursively replicated in one another. According to this perspective, playfulness at any point in the system could influence playfulness elsewhere in the system.

Future studies could study single supervisory systems and look at the playfulness in the supervision process in comparison to the playfulness in the sessions of the trainees being supervised. Another level of investigation could then gather data on the family systems of each supervisee, their functions in their own family systems, and the role of playfulness throughout. Other studies could focus solely on the aspect of the clinician’s playfulness in their family of origin and their playfulness with their clients.

Focusing specifically on humor and laughter in future studies could also look at the interpersonal role of laughter in the supervisory system, the clinical system, or both, such as the research conducted by Marci et al. (2004) in which they measured the skin conductivity of therapists and clients during therapy sessions. After noticing that the therapists' skin conductivity scores increased significantly when clients laughed—irrespective of whether the therapist laughed—they suggested that their findings supported their theory of a shared of biology. Given that this is highly consistent with Bowen family systems theory, it warrants further research.

There are many specific topics that came up during the interviews that would make excellent topics for future research. The participants all described the benefits of the capacity to laugh at oneself. For example, one of the participants described his observation that the clients who could laugh at themselves tended to do better in recovery. Another participant suggested using the capacity to laugh at oneself as an outcome measure of therapy. These are both fascinating areas to explore, and also raise questions about what factors contribute to increasing the capacity to laugh at oneself. The current study goes some way toward addressing the question, but only insofar as a person has explored the ocean by paddling at the seaside.

Other topics that came up in the interviews and which deserve much more attention, had to do with the function of play and humor in family systems. For example, future research could go into much greater detail in exploring the multigenerational transmission of playfulness and humor. Studies could look at playfulness in relation to sibling position, which three of the participants addressed. Other potential areas of

research include exploring when and how jokers and clowns emerge in family systems, and how they function.

The participants' use of spatial, directional, and positional language when talking about the presence or absence of play and humor is another potential area of interest. It may be the case that the participants use equivalent language when discussing any topic, but it is at least worth asking the question—particularly given the parallels with spatial concepts in Bowen family systems theory.

Finally, the nature of neutral playfulness can be studied in much greater detail. What does it involve? How does it develop in different contexts? What is the experience of the one being playful and what is the experience of others in the system? Exactly how does the emotional system respond and what does that look like in different contexts? Furthermore, as discussed above, the relationship between playfulness and seriousness is in itself an interesting matter and one that can certainly be investigated further. Of particular interest to students of Bowen family systems theory is the emotional flexibility described by Bowen and elaborated on by the participants in this study.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A

### Bowen Family Systems Training Programs

#### 1. Bowen Theory Academy

Online

<https://bowentheoryacademy.org/>

*Programs offered:*

- Online Research Seminar held three times a year

#### 2. Center for the Study of Human Systems

Winchester/ Richmond, VA

[www.hsystems.org](http://www.hsystems.org)

*Programs offered:*

- Leadership seminar

#### 3. Center for the Study of Natural Systems and the Family

Houston, TX

[www.csnsf.org](http://www.csnsf.org)

*Programs offered:*

- Annual consultation seminar (meets monthly for 10 months)
- Monthly webcast conferences with Michael Kerr
- Symposiums
- Individual coaching and consulting

#### 4. Florida Family Research Network

Miami, FL

<http://www.ffrnbowentheory.org>

*Programs offered:*

- Annual seminar (meets monthly for 9 months)
- Annual one-day conference

#### 5. ISS Family Institute, International Social Service Hong Kong Branch

Wanchai, Hong Kong

<http://www.isshk.org>

*Programs offered:*

- Foundation Program in Bowen Family Systems Theory (7 modules)
- 2-year Professional Training Program in Bowen Family Systems Theory and Therapy (culminating in a Certificate of Completion)
- Community programs for the general public (individually taught multi-week courses)



## 6. KC Center for Family Systems

Kansas City, MO

<https://www.kcfamilysystems.org/>

*Programs offered:*

- Postgraduate Education and Training Series (meets monthly for 9 months)

## 7. Living Systems

Vancouver, BC, Canada

[www.livingsystems.ca](http://www.livingsystems.ca)

*Programs offered:*

- Clinical Internship/Practicum Program (culminates in Certification in Living Systems Counseling)

## 8. Navigating Systems

Washington, D.C.

<https://www.navigatingsystemsdc.com/navigating-systems-forum>

*Programs offered:*

- One-day introductory course
- Navigating Systems Learning Forum (meets monthly for seven months: consists of three in-person weekend seminars and four one-day webinars)
- Year-long advanced program: Advancing Navigating Systems (group online forum and individual coaching)

## 9. Princeton Family Center

Princeton, NJ

[www.princetonfamilycenter.org](http://www.princetonfamilycenter.org)

*Programs offered:*

- Annual seminar (meets monthly for 8 months)

## 10. Programs in Bowen Theory

Sebastopol, CA

<https://www.programsinbowentheory.org/training.html>

*Programs offered:*

- Annual conference
- Annual seminar (meets monthly for 8 months)

## 11. Rutgers's School of Social Work

New Brunswick, NJ

<https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/academics/continuing-education/certificate-programs/bowen-family-systems-theory-clinical-certificate>

*Programs offered:*

- Single day workshops
- Basic Certificate Program (culminating in a Clinical Certificate in Bowen Family Systems Theory)

## **12. Southern California Training in Bowen Theory**

San Diego, CA

[www.socalbowentheory.com](http://www.socalbowentheory.com)

*Programs offered:*

- Monthly consultation groups
- Monthly webcast conferences with Michael Kerr
- San Diego Bowen Theory Postgraduate Training Program
- Individual Bowen theory coaching and supervision
- Two annual one-day conferences

## **13. The Bowen Center**

Georgetown, D.C.

<http://thebowencenter.org/training/>

*Programs offered:*

- Online Introduction to Bowen Theory and Its Applications
- Postgraduate Research Seminars
- Faith Leadership Seminar
- Postgraduate Program in Bowen Family Systems Theory and its Applications
- Internship Program

## **14. The Center for Family Consultation**

Evanston, IL

[www.thecenterforfamilyconsultation.com](http://www.thecenterforfamilyconsultation.com)

*Programs offered:*

- Postgraduate Training Program in Bowen Family Systems Therapy
- Family of Origin Seminar (meets monthly for 10 months)
- Four annual one-day conferences
- Ethic in Practice one-day seminar
- Online Study Group
- Online class: Bowen Family Systems 101

## **15. The Family Systems Institute**

Neutral Bay, NSW, Australia

<http://www.thefsi.com.au/>

*Programs offered:*

- Certificate Program in Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice:
  - One-year introductory certificate program
  - Three-year advanced certificate program
- In-house team trainings for clinicians

**16. The Learning Space**

Washington, D.C.

[thelearningspacedc.com](http://thelearningspacedc.com)

*Programs offered:*

- Monthly forums

**17. The New England Seminar on Bowen Theory**

Dorchester, MA

<http://www.bowentheoryne.org>

*Programs offered:*

- One-day seminars/presentations

**18. Vermont Center for Family Studies**

Essex Junction, VT, Canada

[www.vermontcenterforfamilystudies.org](http://www.vermontcenterforfamilystudies.org)

*Programs offered:*

- Annual seminar (meets monthly for eight months)

**19. Western Pennsylvania Family Center**

Pittsburgh, PA

<http://wpfc.net/training-in-bowen-theory/basic-seminar/>

*Programs offered:*

- Basic Seminar in Bowen Theory
- Continued Study: Application of Bowen Theory to One's Own Family

## **Appendix B**

### **Bowen Family Systems Training Program Objectives**

#### **Understanding Theory**

- Developing a systems thinking approach (e.g. The Bowen Center, 2018)
- Understand Bowen's eight concepts (e.g. Rutgers School of Social Work, 2019)
- Acquire a conceptual framework for understanding human functioning (e.g. The Princeton Family Center for Education, 2019)

#### **Develop thinking based on theory**

- Learn to define and present participant's own thinking on theory and practice (e.g. Center for Family Consultation, 2019)
- Examine links between Bowen family systems theory and research in the natural sciences (e.g. Center for Family Consultation, 2019)

#### **Apply theory in one's own life**

- Study one's own relationship system (e.g. The Western Pennsylvania Family Center, 2019)
- Study one's own functioning in family, clinical practice, and community systems (e.g. Programs in Bowen Theory, 2018)
- Develop ability to apply theory responsibly and thoughtfully (e.g. South Carolina Education and Training in Bowen Family Systems Theory, 2009)

#### **Self management**

- Increase self-awareness (e.g. The Princeton Family Center for Education, 2019)
- Manage self (e.g. The Learning Space, 2019)
- Increase maturity (e.g. KC Center for Family Systems, 2019)
- Further personal and professional goals (e.g. Vermont Center for Family Studies, 2019)
- Improve/strengthen human relationships (e.g. International Social Service Hong Kong Branch, 2019)
- Develop leadership (Center for the Study of Human Systems, 2018)

## Appendix C

### Recruitment Flier



*Seeking interview subjects for a research study that explores the experiences of play, playfulness, and humor during Bowen family systems theory training:*

### **Why did the Therapist go to Salamander School? Exploring the Functions of Play During Bowen Family Systems Theory Training**

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Research participants must be psychotherapists with at least three years experience studying Bowen family systems theory (BFST). This training must have involved supervision/consultation/coaching with a BFST-trained supervisor/consultant/coach at least six times a year.

Participants will complete a brief, demographic questionnaire and participate in an individual interview lasting up to 75 minutes. Participants will have the option of submitting a family diagram to the researcher prior to the interview.

Interviewees living in South Florida will have the option of being interviewed at their own therapy offices, at the therapy office of the researcher, or via Zoom. Interviewees living outside South Florida will be interviewed via Zoom. Participants whose interviews are conducted via Zoom must have participated in at least six online conversations as part of their training.

Participants will not be paid or compensated for their participation.

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To sign up for the study or to find out more, please contact Helen Reynolds at [helentmreynolds@icloud.com](mailto:helentmreynolds@icloud.com) / 954-279-0994

## **Appendix D**

### **Informed Consent Forms**

1. Informed consent for Zoom (see next page)
2. Informed consent form for interviewee's therapy office (see page 301)
3. Informed consent form for researcher's therapy office (see page 305)



**College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences**

3301 College Avenue  
Fort Lauderdale, FL, 33314

**PHONE:** 800-541-6682

**WEB:** [cahss.nova.edu](http://cahss.nova.edu)

**General Informed Consent Form**  
**NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled**

*Why did the Therapist go to Salamander School?*

*Exploring the Functions of Play During Bowen Family Systems Theory Training*

**Who is doing this research study?**

College: College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Department of Family Therapy

Principal Investigator: Helen Reynolds, MS

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Christopher Burnett, Psy.D.

Site Information: Zoom

Funding: Unfunded

**What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of play, playfulness, and humor during the process of studying Bowen family systems theory. The potential benefits of the study include an increased understanding of the functions of play, playfulness, and humor throughout the process of defining a self according to Bowen family systems theory. The results of the study may help supervisors and supervisees have a more nuanced understanding of the function of play, playfulness, and humor in their own approach to studying/coaching.

**Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you have studied Bowen family systems theory for at least three years and your perspectives on your experiences may include valuable information about the topic.

This study will include about 6-9 people. It is expected that 3-5 people will be from this location.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, you will be invited to submit an optional family diagram, and you will participate in one individual online interview using Zoom software.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

- Complete demographic questionnaire. The questionnaire will gather basic information about your personal, academic, and professional background
- Optional: send a family diagram. You may submit a family diagram if you would like the interviewer to have access to this information for the purposes of the interview.
- One individual online interview using Zoom software. The interview will be scheduled at a convenient time for you. The interview will last up to 75 minutes.

**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

Potential risks:

- Physical risks: none
- Psychological risks: minimal. It is possible that a topic raised during the interview could trigger feelings of discomfort. It is not anticipated that there is greater likelihood for this to occur than during other conversations about Bowen family systems theory.
- Privacy risks: minimal. The community of people studying Bowen family systems theory is relatively small. Therefore, compared to larger groups, this increases the chance that another member of the community could identify an interviewee.
- Legal risks: none
- Social risks: none
- Economic risks: none
- Group or community risks: none

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study but you may request that it not be used.

**What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

The possible benefit of your being in this research study is increased understanding of the functions of play, playfulness, and humor in your efforts to define a self according to Bowen family systems theory. There is no guarantee or promise that you will receive any



benefit from this study. We hope the information learned from this research study will benefit other people with similar conditions in the future.

**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. The information collected during this study will be kept on a memory card and a flash drive, both of which will be stored in a locked box in my home office. The interviews will be conducted on Zoom, which provides end-to-end encryption. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely in a locked box in my home office. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by erasing the data and physically destroying the memory card and the flash drive with a hammer.

**Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

This research study involves audio recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact:

Helen Reynolds, MS can be reached at 954-279-0994.

If primary is not available, contact:

Dr. Christopher Burnett, Psy.D. can be reached at 954-262-3010

**Research Participants Rights**

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
Nova Southeastern University  
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790  
[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

### **Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section**

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

#### **SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:**

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

#### **Adult Signature Section**

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of  
Person Obtaining Consent  
and Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining  
Consent & Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



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**General Informed Consent Form**  
**NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled**  
*Why did the Therapist go to Salamander School?*  
*Exploring the Functions of Play During Bowen Family Systems Theory Training*

**Who is doing this research study?**

College: College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Department of Family Therapy

Principal Investigator: Helen Reynolds, MS

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Christopher Burnett, Psy.D.

Site Information: The Transformation Project, 4431 Southwest 64th Avenue Suites 107-109, Davie, FL 33314

Funding: Unfunded

**What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of play, playfulness, and humor during the process of studying Bowen family systems theory. The potential benefits of the study include an increased understanding of the functions of play, playfulness, and humor throughout the process of defining a self according to Bowen family systems theory. The results of the study may help supervisors and supervisees have a more nuanced understanding of the function of play, playfulness, and humor in their own approach to studying/coaching.

**Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you have studied Bowen family systems theory for at least three years and your perspectives on your experiences may include valuable information about the topic.

This study will include about 6-9 people. It is expected that 1 person will be from this location.

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, you will be invited to submit an optional family diagram, and you will participate in one individual interview at my office.

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**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

Potential risks:

- Physical risks: none
- Psychological risks: minimal. It is possible that a topic raised during the interview could trigger feelings of discomfort. It is not anticipated that there is greater likelihood for this to occur than during other conversations about Bowen family systems theory.
- Privacy risks: minimal. The community of people studying Bowen family systems theory is relatively small. Therefore, compared to larger groups, this increases the chance that another member of the community could identify an interviewee.
- Legal risks: none
- Social risks: none
- Economic risks: none
- Group or community risks: none

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study but you may request that it not be used.

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**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

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There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

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**Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

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If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact: Helen Reynolds, MS can be reached at 954-279-0994.

If primary is not available, contact: Dr. Christopher Burnett, Psy.D. can be reached at 954-262-3010

**Research Participants Rights**

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board  
 Nova Southeastern University  
 (954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790  
[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

**Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section**

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Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

Printed Name of  
Person Obtaining Consent  
and Authorization

Signature of Person Obtaining  
Consent & Authorization

Date



**College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences**

3301 College Avenue  
Fort Lauderdale, FL, 33314

**PHONE:** 800-541-6682

**WEB:** [cahss.nova.edu](http://cahss.nova.edu)

**General Informed Consent Form**  
**NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled**  
*Why did the Therapist go to Salamander School?*

*Exploring the Functions of Play During Bowen Family Systems Theory Training*

**Who is doing this research study?**

College: College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Department of Family Therapy

Principal Investigator: Helen Reynolds, MS

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Christopher Burnett, Psy.D.

Site Information: The therapy office of the research subject

Funding: Unfunded

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_____	_____	_____
Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent and Authorization	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Authorization	Date
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**Appendix E**  
**Demographic Questionnaire**

<b>Age:</b>	<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Ethnicity:</b>
-------------	----------------	-------------------

<b>Level of education:</b>
<b>Please briefly describe your clinical training:</b>
<b>Please briefly describe your professional history:</b>
<b>Current professional status:</b>

<b>When/where were you introduced to Bowen family systems theory (BFST)?</b>
<b>How long have you studied BFST?</b>
<b>Have you coached/trained/supervised others in BFST? If so, for how long?</b>

**You are welcome to submit a family of origin diagram presenting the basic facts of three generations (*optional*)**

## Appendix F

### Follow-Up Interview Prompts

- What is your understanding of play?
- What is your understanding of playfulness?
- What is your understanding of humor?
- What have been your experiences of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor while learning Bowen family systems theory?
- What have been your experiences of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor with your Bowenian coach/supervisor?
- How have your experiences of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor developed over time?
- How has your thinking about these experiences of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor developed over time?
- How have you experienced the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in other relationship contexts?
- How *do you currently* experience the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in other relationship contexts?
- What is the relationship between your experiences of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor across different relationship contexts?
- How do you understand the function of the presence/absence of play/playfulness/humor in these experiences?

*Note:* Questions later in the interview will be modified based on earlier answers.

## Appendix G

### Opening Statement

5/25/2019

*What I currently believe about play, playfulness, and humor as they relate to BFST.*

I have already laid this out fairly clearly in chapters 1 and 2, and I will summarize here.

All human behavior takes place within the emotional currents of the interacting interpersonal and intrapersonal emotional systems. Thus, any example of play, playfulness, and humor in some way reflects the intersection of emotional processes that are active during the behavior.

At first (several years) ago I misunderstood that calmness was a reflection of higher functioning, and that play represented an interaction that was possible in response to lowered anxiety. I now understand that playfulness can be used as a way of managing anxiety, and I have come to reflect on the automaticity with which play and humor take place in relationships. This is neither good nor bad, it is wired into our very being.

This has become clearer to me as I have read about the function of play in other animals. It is evident that play often functions to manage the anxiety related to social living, to feeling threatened, and is especially related to anxiety related to closeness and distance, to the intensity of social interactions and so on. Furthermore, research into early human life has helped to clarify how behaviors are selected for at the level of the individual and the level of the group, and that something like behavior gets wired into our emotional behavioral repertoire at a deep instinctual level. I am fascinated by these things:

- That play has evolved to be more complex in more complex life forms, and that there is evidence to suggest that as it evolved, it has gradually come to serve a role in these more advanced species: as a means for the young of the species to develop well calibrated emotional systems.
- That Bowen described the importance of maintaining an emotional distance from which the individual has the freedom to move from humor to seriousness.
- That as I began to operate differently in my functional position in my FOO, I noticed my increased capacity to remain playful when staying connected after a moment in which I made the effort to manage myself without automatically managing my anxiety through cutoff, conflict, or triangulation of another person (all of which are forms of distance (Kerr, 2019).
- That Michael Kerr suggested that play “is how you show the differentiation” (personal communication, March 1, 2019)
- That early humans, for whom resources were abundant, may have lived in emotional systems where greater individuality was tolerated, and less intense emotional triangles were necessary to bind chronic anxiety. That these societies used humor and play as a way of managing individuality-togetherness tensions in such a way that individuals retained greater freedom to make their own choices.

Based on these facts/observations, I expect to find that people who have studied and applied BFST for decades, utilize humor and play in their efforts to manage self without trying to get others to be different. My hypothesis is that as species evolve to

consist of ever more complex social systems along with greater capacity to be a “self” within that system, there must be evolving behaviors and neurological structures that are co-evolving with those capacities. Play and humor may be ways that humans in particular are negotiating the increased capacity to be a self within a system. There are many ways in which play and humor function in the service of togetherness and social harmony, but also ways in which play and humor function in the service of the capacity to maintain connections that simultaneously involve emotional closeness and clarity about self—and actively maintained boundaries.

I expect to hear examples of the ways in which the interviewees have experienced humor and play (including the LACK of humor and play) as manifestations of both these processes. I am excited to hear the specific details of how these processes played out. I am very excited to hear how the interviewees think of their experiences and how they understand them through theory. I am VERY excited to learn things that I wasn't expecting, to discover ways in which the facts described above can be made sense of in other ways.

What is surprising about having laid this out is the relief that comes from knowing what I think, based on a great deal of thought, study, experiential application, and reflection. I now feel more open to learning because I feel calmer about knowing that I know my own mind going in. This makes me less vulnerable to defensiveness, to borrowing self in the form of accepting what others say regardless of my own knowledge (or in the absence of my own knowledge or consideration).

## Appendix H

### Audit Form

<b>Notes</b>	
<b>Indicative quotes</b>	
<b>Key cross-references</b>	
<b>Participants contributing to subthemes</b>	
<b>Subthemes</b>	
<b>Participants contributing to this theme</b>	
<b>Superordinate theme</b>	

*Note.* Adapted from “Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis”, by Larkin, M. and Thompson, A., 2012, p. 113.



### **Biographical Sketch**

Helen Reynolds was born and raised in England. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Drama from the University of Exeter in 1998, and after graduation spent the next thirteen years traveling, living, and working in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Mexico. During this time she was an apple picker, a teacher, a puppet maker, a therapeutic childcare specialist, a server, a theatre teacher and producer, an Aikido instructor, and a program director. In 2011 she returned to school to study family therapy, and received a Master of Science before embarking on her doctorate. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist and has been in private practice since 2018. Outside of her clinical work Helen is a third degree black belt in Aikido, a writer, and the founder and director of the Fort Lauderdale Story Slam. She has presented nationally and internationally on Bowen family systems theory and play.