

Combining Ethnographic and Family Systems Perspectives in Doctor of Ministry Research – A Helpful Union

David Lee Jones, Th.D.

Assistant Professor of Congregational Care
Doctor of Ministry Director
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX

Abstract: This paper argues that although the fields of ethnography and Bowen family systems theory are two distinct disciplines, there are core constructs in the field of Bowen family systems theory that resonate with and complement ethnographic “lenses” and practices. I further argue that combining complementary family systems’ “lenses” with ethnographic research can enhance contextual assessments in Doctor of Ministry research projects. Finally, I will select one case study¹ from Mary Clark Moschella’s book, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, with a view towards articulating how several select core family systems constructs can offer additional and/or alternative assessments and interpretations of the ethnographic data for both understanding the case more deeply and identifying possibilities for future transformation.

In January 2011, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary rolled out a new Doctor of Ministry curriculum based on longstanding observations by our faculty regarding the over-arching objectives of our program and how we intend to teach students to craft outstanding final doctor of ministry projects. The first doctoral seminar our students now take is a course entitled: *Ministry and Context*. This course introduces students to various research tools, practices, perspectives, and “lenses” for mapping and assessing their ecclesial landscape with a view towards identifying possible final project topics or ideas. One major component

¹ Moschella, M., *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008. I am assessing the ethnographic study of In Sun, a female Korean seminary student who interviews Korean pastors’ wives at a freestanding North American seminary, 152-159. *The Journal of Christian Ministry*

of this course is introducing our students to the field of ethnography. Later in my methods class, which immediately follows the context course, students are trained how to view and assess their ecclesial contexts through both family systems and narrative lenses.

Over time, our faculty noticed something that concerned us—our students often arrived in the program with rather fixed ideas of potential final project topics and often thought they already had “the answer” to their context’s problem or “narrative of concern.”² Somewhat analogous to the tension between exegesis and eisegesis, we want our students to begin first with a thorough analysis of their ecclesial contexts in a way that an exegete begins by first completing a careful exegesis of a biblical text to see what surfaces directly from the text rather than projecting an idea, agenda, or topic onto the text.

Metaphorically speaking, many of our students enter our program “with a great illustration in search of a sermon.” In this initial contextual assessment course, students are discouraged from focusing too narrowly on a project topic prior to doing an in-depth contextual analysis (and prior to taking their required elective courses) and encouraged to first focus on their particular context by employing ethnographic and other qualitative research tools and methods to their setting.

² Savage, C. and Presnell, W. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities*. Louisville, KY: Wayne Oates Institute, 2008, 30. Savage and Presnell offer convincing arguments for moving away from problem solving language to addressing a narrative of concern.

We require this context course before all other courses for several reasons. First, we want to include the voices of the entire ecclesial community in forming the “narrative of concern” or “problem” students will ultimately address in their doctor of ministry projects. In fact, in the Savage/Presnell model at Drew Seminary, which combines a narrative and Bowen family systems approach to congregational research, students are required to recruit a “lay advisory team”³ prior to beginning their research in order to help “broker” the community’s narratives and stories to ensure the voices of the larger community are included in creating a proposal. The “lay advisory team” in Drew’s model also serves as an advisory board to the student throughout the project and helps with the final evaluation. Lay Advisory team members help with the final evaluation or assessment, or what Savage prefers to call “discernment”⁴ because when the student researcher is also the pastor of the context being studied and evaluated, and that pastor is the sole person interviewing his/her own flock, there is a high probability that the data may become jaded or distorted because of parishioners’ reluctance to say anything critical or negative about their pastor’s project which they know his/her doctoral committee will read. Employing a “lay advisory team” helps ensure more anonymity of the participants’ evaluations.

Second, for ethical, professional, methodological, and pedagogical reasons we prefer to minimize Doctor of Ministry students representing

³ Ibid, 27.

⁴ Ibid, 45, 48, 69.

themselves as “the experts,”⁵ and subsequently using their congregations or other research settings as their personal “laboratories.” In fact, in contrast to being “experts,” Savage and Presnell prefer to call DMin students “researchers” or “story brokers.”⁶ Often pastors are relative newcomers to their respective contexts, and the goal is to tap the communal expertise for understanding a system through the embedded multiple narratives that exist in the members of any congregation. This is done best by recruiting a lay advisory team to help broker a faith community’s multi-layered stories and overt and covert narratives.

Savage and Presnell combine family systems theory with narrative methodologies in order to guide Doctor of Ministry students to deeper levels of contextual understanding. They write:

. . . we hope to provide a procedural map for studying and reflecting upon the multiple, intersecting stories surrounding a narrative of concern in ministry. Our map is drawn as an interpretive matrix in which reside the personal and faith stories of the researcher, the intersecting stories of the faith community’s praxis, their religious traditions, and research stories garnered from readings, found documents, contextual study (demographics, culture, other social science research, history, etc.) and the study of symbol, ritual, and artifacts.⁷

In a similar vein, I wish to combine ethnography with Bowen family systems constructs and methods in order to deepen our students’ capacity to understand and describe their faith communities. Let’s begin by defining ethnography. In her book, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*,

⁵ Friedman, E. H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. New York: Aaron Press, 3. Systems expert Friedman and narrative theorists Savage and Presnell all discourage pastors from taking an “expert” stance.

⁶ Savage and Presnell, 75.

⁷ Ibid, 30.

Mary Clark Moschella defines ethnography as follows: “Ethnography is a form of social research used by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars to study living human beings in their social and cultural contexts.”⁸ The quote evokes a similar saying by Anton Boisen, the father of the modern Clinical Pastoral Education movement (CPE), who insisted that seminaries should train pastors to “read and interpret” “living human documents” with the same rigor as they train them to read biblical texts.⁹ Both ethnography and family systems theory are interested in observing, reading, understanding, and describing (but not diagnosing) “living human documents” as they interact in their respective contexts or “systems.”

Moschella further notes:

Participant observation is the hallmark of this kind of social research. Ethnographers go to the places where people live, work, or pray in order to take in firsthand the experience of group life and social interactions. Ethnographers pay attention to mundane sights and smells and sounds and gestures. These are all elements of the cultural life of the people. Ethnographers notice the material dimensions of life, the financial workings of an organization, the power-relations between people, as well as their poetic or artistic artifacts and expressions. As Yogi Berra puts it, “You can observe a lot by watching.”¹⁰

Several key family systems theorists advocate that pastors become “observant researchers” or “students” of the relational interactions in both

⁸ Moschella, 25.

⁹ . Boisen, A., *The Exploration of the Inner World*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1936, 185.

¹⁰ . Ibid.

The Journal of Christian Ministry

ecclesial settings and their families of origin.¹¹

Moschella notes that in recent years ethnographers are more mindful than in the past that ethnography is not as “objective” as once believed because of how much the social location of the researchers brings to bear on how and what is observed and gets filtered through the researchers’ personal and cultural biases.

Multi-generational Transmission Process: There are many ways to check one’s personal biases (e.g., analysis of one’s social location, gender, class, etc.) to name a few. To this list I wish to add, but not privilege, a helpful family systems perspective on identifying one’s own potential biases – i.e., what Murray Bowen called the “multi-generational transmission process”¹² in one’s “family of origin.” Bowen writes: “This concept describes the pattern that develops over multiple generations as children emerge from the parental family with higher, equal, or lower basic levels of differentiation than the parents.”¹³ This concept also notes that family characteristics, emotional forces, projection, maturity, anxiety, illness patterns, dysfunction, or pathology that are not directly dealt with or resolved so as to facilitate differentiation and healthy restructuring will surface in future generations--often in more pronounced or concentrated forms.¹⁴ One’s “multi-

¹¹ Richardson, R.W., *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor’s Own Family*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 89. Friedman and Steinke also advocate that pastors become a “researchers.”

¹² Bowen, M. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. New York: Aronson Press, 1982, 477.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 491.

generational transmission process” is the stuff of which countertransference is made.

The point is clear. Pastors who have unresolved issues with their own family of origin are vulnerable to countertransference surfacing in their pastoral work and/or contextual research as anxious or reactive manifestations when congregational or research issues mirror or remind them of sensitive or threatening material from their own families. Both ethnography and family systems theory agree that a high degree of critical self-awareness and maturity is necessary to apply the perspectives and methods of both disciplines effectively. Moschella writes about this at length in her section: “The Use of Self in Pastoral Ethnography,”¹⁵ and coins the term “reflexivity”¹⁶ which she defines as being mindful of what is going on in oneself and paying attention to personal issues and distortions which surface in one’s research. She says that “reflexivity” in ethnography “is analogous to a key practice involved in pastoral counseling that involves the use of the self. The technical term for this is ‘countertransference.’”¹⁷

Family of Origin Work and Emotional Field: In his book, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family System Theory and the Pastor’s Own Family*, Ronald Richardson offers helpful and practical suggestions on how to achieve this kind of heightened self-awareness coupled with the capacity to “observe” an

¹⁵ Moschella, 103-108.

¹⁶ Ibid, 106.

¹⁷ Ibid, 103.

emotional system deeply without getting caught in its “emotional field” by doing “family of origin work.”¹⁸ Family of origin work is generally understood by family systems theorists as a rigorous, life-long exercise which begins with crafting a genogram,¹⁹ doing an extensive history or timeline of significant family events, making brief family visits in order to discuss or “work through” sensitive issues, discovering and exploring family secrets, and generally working towards becoming what Bowen called a “solid” or “basic self” (well differentiated-self) while attempting to remain connected in healthy ways to everyone in the family system.²⁰

By “emotional field,”²¹ family systems theorists are referring to the generalized emotional climate that surrounds a family or other system. A family can exude climates of both anxiety or calm—and everything in between. Bowen notes that therapists must be adept at navigating such forces by knowing when to work both “inside” and “outside” a family’s “emotional field.”²²

Bowen understood an “emotional field” as something akin to a magnetic field—a powerful force that can pull persons into a system’s emotional lair and cause them to lose their power to remain themselves or make free choices. Both ethnographers and family systems theorists agree that in order to be optimally

¹⁸ Richardson, R. *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family System Theory and the Pastor’s Own Family*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, 39.

¹⁹ For two excellent books on how to craft genograms see: the McGoldrick and Galindo books noted in my Works Cited. The McGoldrick book is thick and sophisticated, whereas the Galindo book is better suited for beginners. Both are quite useful.

²⁰ Ibid. Richardson devotes chapters 3-10 to explain the mechanics of doing family of origin work.

²¹ Bowen, 467.

²² Ibid.

“observational” one must be able to “join a system” yet ultimately remain free, to some degree, of its emotional forces. Pastors and ethnographic researchers alike would benefit from doing substantive “family of origin work” to enhance their respective practices.

Moschella shares the ethnographic research of a woman Korean student named In Sun who studied the wives of Korean seminary students at a freestanding North American seminary. It would be fascinating if Sun had done extensive family of origin work on her own family of origin, including a genogram prior to conducting her research and then shared it as a “reflexive practice” with her readers. What, for example, in her family of origin and personal “story” might have motivated her study? What unresolved issues in her own culture, family, and life’s journey both added to and complicated what was underneath her desire to conduct this research? How did her own “generational transmission process,” and “countertransference” both help and hinder how she crafted, gathered, implemented, assessed, and interpreted her ethnographic data? Had she done extensive family of origin work with a view towards specifically connecting it to her study – how might her study have been different or improved?

Viewing Sun’s research project from family systems perspectives sheds new light on how to “see,” describe, and interpret her data. The Korean seminarians’ wives were both consciously and unconsciously systemically

marginalized on several levels. Moschella notes that these wives were chiefly marginalized on the following three levels: 1) by virtue of being women of color; 2) by being newcomers; 3) and by virtue of being pastors' wives.²³

Position vs. Personality: Viewing this study through systems lenses, however, one might describe it using several more systems constructs which enhance and deepen the ethnographic perspectives. First, systems theorists would probably immediately notice the tension between what Ed Friedman called "position rather than personality."²⁴ Friedman notes that: "our individual problems have more to do with our relational networks ... where we stand within the relational systems, and how we function in that position."²⁵ In a sense, all three of Moschella's levels of marginalization (women of color, newcomers, and pastors' wives) can be understood as marginalization by virtue of the wives' "position" in the system.

Moschella describes the wives of the Korean seminary students as those "whose status and role are often sharply proscribed."²⁶ From a systems perspective, it might be said that they have a distinctively proscribed "systemic position" which is directly tied to the cultural name or label: "samonim"²⁷ or "pastor's wife." With this label, and its culturally and religiously embedded

²³ Moschella, 152.

²⁴ Friedman, E. H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. New York: Guilford, 1985, 24.

²⁵ Ibid, 12.

²⁶ Moschella, 152.

²⁷ Ibid, 156.

“role,” come certain proscribed systemic expectations, like not being called by their own names; being expected to cook at all the Korean seminary student dinners, and in the case of one woman, routinely being expected to baby-sit at her husband’s internship congregation which resulted in her being excluded from worship.

These examples clearly illustrate what Friedman meant when noting that one’s “position in a system” more often defines how a person functions in that system than one’s particular personality. Friedman’s point is well taken-- systemic forces and expectations are so powerful that they often trump one’s individual capacity to define oneself maturely.

The Togetherness Amalgam: The above examples also demonstrate what Bowen called “the togetherness amalgam”²⁸ – the “group think” emotional systemic forces which place “we” above “I.” He writes: “The togetherness amalgam is bound together by assigning (undue) positive value on thinking about the other before self, living for the other, sacrifice for others, love and devotion and compassion for others, and feeling responsible for the comfort and well being of others.”²⁹ And further: “A reasonably differentiated person is capable of genuine concern for others without expecting something in return, but the togetherness forces treat differentiation as selfish and hostile.”³⁰

²⁸ Bowen, 494.

²⁹ Ibid, 494.

³⁰ Ibid, 495.

Reframing: A View Towards Transformation: Systems theorists would probably ponder how the position of “samanim” potentially holds these women hostage in a “down position” in their particular system and how “reframing”³¹ their position differently might free them to function more equally in the system. “Reframing” is generally thought of as a practice which attempts to help persons think about and respond to systemic issues, structures, or concerns differently – sometimes even paradoxically. Reframing these women’s embedded systemic positions of “samanim” to something more egalitarian, however, would demand substantive systemic change and such change would most likely increase systemic anxiety. What might this kind of reframing ideally look like, however?

Those who hold more systemic power would need to begin calling these women by their first names rather than only “samanim” because it would respect and help empower them to claim their individual worth and distinctive identities. Sun’s research actually articulated how (to some degree) this kind of systemic change was actually achieved when she notes that as these women were invited and encouraged to speak, and as they claimed their distinctive “voices,” new possibilities in the systemic structure were cracked open for them. Other babysitters volunteered (albeit all women); the husbands began taking more responsibility for community dinners; and some of the women began working on their personal and professional development by taking English classes.

³¹ Capps: D., *Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral Care*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. *The Journal of Christian Ministry*

Significant power-holders in the system began to ponder and embrace rethinking (or reframing) longstanding roles and rituals defined by religion, culture, gender, power, and position. Those in power had to create and promote “safe space” for these women to be heard, valued in new ways, and to claim and re-define their distinctive voices, roles, aspirations, and dreams. From a systems perspective – a “closed system” “opened up.”

Open vs. Closed Systems: When Moschella discusses how the “voices” of these Korean women had been “silenced”³² another core family systems construct comes to mind – “open vs. closed systems.” In my Handout of Family Systems Definitions, I define “closed” and “open” systems as follows:

Closed systems are generally understood as those systems which have the following features: They promote dominance, sameness, fusion, cutoff, “herd mentality,” and “group thinking.” Such systems discourage equality, change, differentiation, independence, questioning, speaking up, taking a stand, “rocking the boat,” or expressing concern. They tend to promote immaturity, repression, “stuckness,” triangulation, gossip, “parking lot meetings,” factions, cliques, and secrets. People do not feel safe to question or disagree in such systems for fear of disapproval or retribution. Such systems tend to be reactive and anxious (even if it is hidden beneath the surface) because information is not shared freely and secrets bind anxiety. Leaders tend to dominate or overfunction which causes others members of the system to acquiesce or underfunction. A few at the top are disproportionately responsible for the many. Conversely, closed systems often have what Friedman called “peace mongers at the top,” who over/underfunction by “keeping the peace” at all costs and over/underfunction by lacking the capacity to take a stand on certain issues or concerns. “Keeping the peace” at all costs often results in both boundaries that are simultaneously either too porous or too rigid. Closed systems breed fear, repression, paranoia, and suspicion. Closed systems tend to acquiesce to the least mature members or those who hold the most power (who are often the most immature). Closed systems are marked by incessant blaming and often seek a “quick fix” to conflict

³² Moschella, 152.

rather than managing anxiety maturely. Closed systems are often “deadly serious.”

Open systems are generally understood as those systems which value: change, transparency, diversity, differentiation, questioning, disagreeing, discussing, pondering, expressing concern, and giving voice to all. In open systems, people feel safe to express concerns, disagree, and raise questions. Information is shared openly. Open systems encourage and value appropriately open and flexible boundaries and discourage rigidity. Open systems promote neither fusion nor cutoff. Open systems value, promote, and welcome direct communication, making “I statements,” taking responsibility for one’s functioning in the system, and remaining non-reactive. In open systems leaders can “take a stand.” Leaders and members stay connected to each other by discouraging domination, triangulation, gossip, secrets, and “parking lot meetings.” Open systems promote and value “doing the opposite,” playfulness, mystery, paradox, challenge, and adventure.³³

Regarding Sun’s research, we clearly see many features of a “closed” rather than “open” system as noted above. The “closed” aspects of their system are clear. They are held hostage by longstanding overt and covert restrictive cultural roles, mores, expectations, religious traditions, rules, minimized identities, and muted voices. Systems theorists would probably be able to identify more than just the three levels of marginalization that Moschella notes.

For example, these women are marginalized by systemic forces which have a longstanding “generational transmission process” stemming back to their Confucian, cultural heritage, and familial influences. They were “cutoff” in their own Korean system long before arriving in America by virtue of being women; and then further “cutoff” in a North American educational system by being women of color; and they are part of both the Korean and American “systemic

³³ Jones, D., *Doctoral Seminar Family Systems Definitions Class Handout*.
The Journal of Christian Ministry

projection process," i.e., the process of projection where some in any system are "scapegoated" in order to remain in a "down position."

Under-functioning/Over-functioning: The manner in which these women's "position" of "pastor's wife" influences how they function in the system provides a window into another salient systems concept: *under-functioning/over-functioning*. On the one hand, they "under-functioned" because they were not free to become more fully differentiated, and acquiesced to what Bowen called their "pseudo self." Yet on the other hand, they also "over-functioned" by sacrificing their own occupational training and professional aspirations by acquiescing to their husbands' occupational goals and achievement. Finally, they are held in this position, to varying degrees, by what Bowen calls "the societal emotional process," i.e., there are powerful emotional and systemic forces that retain them in their sharply identified roles.

As the women in Sun's research are encouraged to discover and "claim their voices," and as systemic venues and structures subsequently "open up" for them to speak more forthrightly about their particular situations, family systems theorists would note that they are beginning better to "differentiate" themselves. "Differentiation of Self" is a concept developed by Murray Bowen, and it is germane to Sun's research because in the shifting stories of these Korean women, we see several features of Bowen's definition of "differentiation of self" noted below.

Differentiation of Self: Murray Bowen understood “differentiation of self” in two distinct ways: First, he thought of it *internally, i.e.*, the capacity to be differentiated within oneself. By this he means that more highly differentiated persons have the capacity to manage one’s inner emotional and cognitive worlds maturely – even in anxious situations. Second, he thought of it *externally, i.e.*, the capacity to be differentiated in relationships with others. Bowen writes: “A differentiated self is one who can maintain emotional objectivity³⁴ while in the midst of an emotional system in turmoil, yet at the same time actively relate to key people in the system.”³⁵ He also noted, however, “The completely differentiated person has not yet been born.”³⁶ It is important to note that Bowen generally preferred the phrase “differentiation of self” and not “self-differentiation” which some other family systems theorists employ.³⁷

It is important to note that Bowen understood and developed “differentiation” as a biological--not a psychological concept because he borrowed the term of “differentiation” from cellular biology and natural systems theory. Differentiation of persons, for Bowen, is analogous to how cells develop. As healthy cells mature they eventually differentiate, and Bowen noted that the first stage of cells differentiating is establishing or developing a membrane

³⁴ Bowen, M. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, New York: Jason Aronson, 1978, 200. Bowen’s concept of “emotional objectivity” is somewhat of a misnomer because for him differentiation is always a matter of degrees. He developed a “Differentiation of Self Scale” with the number 1 being the lowest (“no self”) and 100 being the highest (“complete differentiation of a perfect self”), but believed no one could achieve above about a 70 on his scale.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 485.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 494.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 467.

(boundary). For example, a stem cell is a cell that has not yet fully differentiated. On a primitive level, cells' boundaries let in what is good and excrete what is bad. On the one hand, healthy boundaries must be appropriately porous in order to let in nourishment and get rid of excrement, and on the other hand, boundaries must be appropriately rigid to maintain a defense against invasive viruses and ward off disease.

Bowen believed that cells mature best when in a system that fosters healthy growth—i.e., a system where there is the ideal amount of balance between distance and closeness—an appropriately open system. Cells need enough closeness to remain connected to surrounding cells and the rest of an organism—yet must retain enough distance so as not to be absorbed, suffocated, or smothered.

Bowen understood differentiation as minimally having the **six** following features. Below I will discuss where I see these features at work in Sun's ethnographic study:

- 1) The ability to define one's "solid self" (Bowen, 364-365) or "basic self" (Bowen, 474, 499) clearly—i.e., the capacity to de-triangle coupled simultaneously with:
- 2) the ability to take a principled stand (Bowen, 449);
- 3) the capacity to stay connected or related to key persons in the system even amidst times of anxiety and reactivity (Bowen, 485 & 514);
- 4) the maturity to manage anxiety non-reactively—i.e., possess a high degree of "emotional objectivity" (Bowen, 485), coupled with the capacity for limited or no defending or counter-attacking (Bowen, 495) and the capacity to think rather than react (Bowen, 490);
- 5) the courage to make decisions based on well defined principles (Bowen, 365, 449),

6) the capacity to regulate or modify the self maturely (Bowen, 449), i.e., the capacity to focus on how oneself is functioning in the system rather than focusing on the behavior or attitudes of others – i.e., to be self rather than other focused (Bowen, 495).

Bowen coined the terms “solid self”³⁸ or “basic self”³⁹ to refer to the self that does not cave in to emotional pressures or collapse into fusion with others. Bowen writes: “The solid self says: ‘This is who I am, what I believe, what I stand for, and what I will or will not do.’ The solid self is made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles.”⁴⁰ He employs the term “pseudo-self” when referring to one’s false or collapsible self and says: “The pseudo-self is created by emotional pressure and can be modified by emotional pressure.”⁴¹ Sun’s study demonstrates that these Korean pastors’ wives did not feel free to define themselves, their needs, and dreams clearly – i.e., be their “basic” or “solid selves.” Their voices, desires, professional aspirations, and very souls were “silenced.” They acquiesced because they probably felt fearful or culturally restrained from taking a public stand against the numerous injustices and frustrations they experienced. They had to maintain these feelings as “secrets.” They were caught in the triangle of wanting humbly to: 1) serve both God and their husbands, 2) remain true to their cultural expectations as faithful “samanim,” and 3) fulfill their own personal needs and professional desires.

³⁸ Ibid, 265.

³⁹ Ibid, 474, 499.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 365.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Secondly, they did not feel free or empowered to take a principled stand and “take up for themselves,” so they remained outwardly obedient and subdued, yet their inner-worlds were crying to be heard, seen, valued, and acknowledged in their own right. In many ways their “system” rendered them “invisible.”

They remained dutifully connected to all in the system—except themselves--whom they sacrificed in order to maintain cultural and systemic balance or what systems theorists call “homeostasis.” Friedman defines homeostasis as: “... the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its existence.”⁴² Paradoxically, they *over-functioned* by giving too much of themselves yet simultaneously also *under-functioned* by giving too much of themselves. Under-functioning/over-functioning is inextricably connected, and always manifests as a mirror image of itself. Thus “giving too much of oneself” can be simultaneously interpreted as both under and over-functioning.

Externally these women manage anxiety, injustice, and reactivity quite calmly by remaining dutifully silent and compliant, yet internally their hearts and souls hurt and they experience something quite the opposite. Arguably, their courage to make decisions based on principle is profoundly compromised by the powerful systemic forces that pressured them dutifully to accept their subservient “role” as a “samonim.”

⁴² Friedman, 23.

The Journal of Christian Ministry

Finally, they over-focused on their own sharply defined roles to the exclusion of claiming their rightful voices and “solid selves” in a system which did not fully value or acknowledge them. Ultimately, they were self-sacrificing to the point of not attending to themselves in systemically or spiritually healthy ways.

Moschella notes, however, that as Sun’s study began to crack open their repressive system by inviting them to discover, name, claim, and assert their muted voices – they find they are empowered to speak up for themselves and the system begins to make some structural shifts which provides the soil necessary for authentic differentiation to bud and blossom. As they claim their voices, the system simultaneously begins to “open up” and, as it does so, we can surmise that they probably feel empowered to define themselves more clearly, take a stand for themselves, and feel more connected to those who are hearing and responding to them in fresh ways. As they feel more valued and heard, as their secret inner-worlds are given more voice, as their hidden inner-hurts and concerns begin to be acknowledged and addressed – we can guess that it probably lowers their anxiety and reactivity, and results in both increased joy and courage to make more future decisions based on principle.

We can also imagine that this new found courage, resulting in part by structural changes in the system which make it a more “safe place” to speak freely and assert themselves authentically, probably also results in increased

capacities to regulate their inner-worlds more openly and maturely, and increases their capacity to focus on how they are functioning in the system rather than focusing solely on those who hold more systemic power than they do – i.e., their husbands and other ecclesial male leaders.

Bowen writes: “Differentiation cannot take place in a vacuum. It has to take place in relation to others, around issues important to both people.”⁴³

Bowen also said: “... differentiation is a self-motivated, self-energized effort and it cannot succeed with outside stimulus.”⁴⁴ And here’s an important point. It took the stimulus of Sun’s prophetic and empowering ethnographic work to be the “outside stimulus” which set the possibility for systemic change in motion. Had the issues important to the pastors’ wives not been important to others in the system – especially to their husbands, how much would have changed? In fact, if not for some spousal support, there probably would have been limited change if any, coupled with and significant opportunities for systemic resistance and backlash. Bowen often predicted that: “Each small step toward the ‘differentiation of self’ is opposed by emotional forces for ‘togetherness.’”⁴⁵

Without some systemic openness to change, these women would have remained stuck and stymied. There are many other family systems constructs I could have employed to illustrate my argument that, at many junctures, the fields of ethnography and Bowen family systems theory overlap and

⁴³ Bowen, 496.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 517.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 494.

complement each other, and that family systems “lenses” can bring fresh insights to enhance ethnographic work, but I chose these because they seemed most germane to Sun’s ethnographic study.

Conclusion:

In this paper I have tried to articulate that there is considerable “cash value” in combining select Bowen family systems constructs with ethnographic theory and practices in Doctor of Ministry research because, on many levels, these two disciplines overlap and because family systems lenses add alternative ways to deepen how to describe, understand, and interpret how persons interact in complex human systems. I have not advocated for privileging family system theory over ethnography or other contextual assessment tools, but rather wish simply to add it as “another arrow in the quiver” of contextual research.

The corpus of the paper assesses Sun’s ethnographic study with Korean pastor’s wives by employing the following nine family systems “lenses”: 1) multi-generational transmission process; 2) family of origin work; 3) emotional field; 4) position vs. personality; 5) togetherness amalgam; 6) reframing; 7) open vs. closed systems; 8) over-functioning/ under-functioning; and 9) differentiation of self to show how family systems constructs and lenses can be combined with an ethnographic study in order to offer alternative perspectives, descriptions,

and assessments of the raw data--with a view towards what Savage and Presnell call newly "imagined futures."⁴⁶

Works Cited

- Boisen, A., *The Exploration of the Inner World*.
New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1936.
- Bowen, M., *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*.
New York: Jason Aaronson Press, 1978.
- Capps: D., *Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral Care*.
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.
- Friedman, E. H., *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*.
New York: Guilford Press, 1985.
- Galindo, I., Boomer, E., Reagan, D. *A Family Genogram Workbook*.
Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2006.
- McGoldrick, M., Gerson, R., Petry, S. *Genograms: Assessment and Intervention*.
New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.
- Moschella, M., *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*.
Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008.
- Richardson, R. *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family System Theory and the Pastor's Own Family*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, 39.
- Savage, C. and Presnell, W. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities*. Louisville, KY: Wayne Oates Institute, 2008.

⁴⁶ Savage & Presnell, 68.