

Family Systems & Murray Bowen Theory

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Executive Summary

Murray Bowen Family System Theory is one of several family models developed by mental health pioneers in the decade or so following the Second World War. For a short postwar period of time, drug therapy was not yet effective and parents were still implicated in their child's behavior. Pharmacological treatment began to take hold after the introduction of Thorazine to the U.S.A., in 1957. In 1983, E. Fuller Torrey published the first edition of his book, *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Manual for Families, Patients, and Providers*, which absolved parents and condemned Bowen.

In spite of its roots in schizophrenia research, elements of Murray Bowen's theory have been included by corporate, church, community, and coaching programs for their organizational personnel training. His work survives because he provided a comprehensive theory that explained many people's behavior and emotionality in groups. Bowenian ideas have been found useful for understanding volunteer, religious, and business organizations and the people who work for them. Unfortunately, these parapsychological coverages often tend to truncate the richness of his work.

For those wanting more elaboration, this paper will briefly describe the short but volatile history of the family therapy movement and how it developed from the work of a few pioneers in the late 1940's to a major influence today. Specifically, the extensive work of Murray Bowen will be quickly traced and the Bowen Family Systems Theory will be described. This essay concentrates on the dynamics of the theory and not its associated therapy. For those wanting more, good sources of detailed credible information are discussed and recommendations for further study are made.

Family Therapy Movement

Therapists began to explore the dynamics of family life after World War II. They observed that many battle-torn veterans readjusted after returning to their families. On the other end of the mental health spectrum, researchers felt that they needed an explanation of why seriously ill patients did not respond to, or regressed, after individual treatment, when they returned to their home environment.

Prior to the family therapy movement, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts focused on the patient's already developed psyche and downplayed current outside detractors. Intrinsic factors were addressed and extrinsic reactions were considered as emanating from forces within the person.

Family therapists expanded the beneficial and toxic influences on the patient to include relatives with whom the patient interacted. The relationship with others, not just intrapsychic forces, was considered the primary basis for emotional states. The importance of an individual's constitution was de-emphasized by family therapists.

Thus, family therapy was a new and different approach to understanding psychopathology. In explaining patients, schools of psychology tend to be somewhat mutually exclusive and parochial. Behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, psychodynamic, psychoanalytic and many other adjectives have been used to modify the noun psychology. They all focus on their own assumed causes and influences of human behavior.

Similarly, with family therapies the family became the primary focus and de-emphasized individual factors. The cause of the problem "seen" by the therapist was no longer the "identified patient" but the dysfunctional family system (Foley, 1984). Unfortunately different belief camps become polarized and exclude other beliefs. Bowen (1984, Ch. 4) used the analogy of John Godfrey Saxe's poem (*cir.* 1850) about the blind men and the elephant to describe practitioners' limited views:

The Blind Men and The Elephant

I. It was six men of Indostan To learning much inclined, Who went to see the Elephant (Though all of them were blind), That each by observation Might satisfy his mind.	II. The <i>First</i> approached the Elephant, And happened to fall Against his broad and sturdy side, And began to brawl; “God bless me! But the Elephant Is very like a wall!”	III. The <i>Second</i> feeling of the Tusk, Cried, “Ho! What have we here So very round and smooth and sharp? To me it might be clear This wonder of an Elephant Is very like a spear!”
IV. The <i>Third</i> approached the animal, And happened to take The squirming trunk within his hands, Thus boldly up and spake: “I see quoth he, “the Elephant Is very like a snake!”	V. The <i>Fourth</i> reached out his eager hand, And felt upon the knee. “What this wondrous beast is like Is mighty plain,” quoth he; “’Tis clearly enough the Elephant Is very like a tree!”	VI. The <i>Fifth</i> who chanced to touch the ear, Said: “E’en the blindest man Can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can, This marvel of an Elephant Is very like a fan!”
VII. The <i>Sixth</i> no sooner had begun About the beast to grope, Than sizing up the swinging tail That fell within his scope, I see quoth he, “the Elephant Is very like a rope!”	VIII. And so these men of Indostan Disputed loud and long, Each in his own opinion Exceeding stiff and strong, Though each was partly in the right, And all were in the wrong!	MORAL So oft in theologic wars, The disputants, I ween, Rail on in utter ignorance Of what each other mean, And prate about and Elephant Not one of them has seen!

As with the blind men of Indostan, psychological camps only "look at" one part of the “elephant.”

I am not going to fully explain every aspect of Murray Bowen’s theory in the limited space available here, nor contrast it with other models. Guidance is offered to those who want to pursue this subject further. You may notice that the key references are somewhat dated. That is the nature of a subject where the fundamental work was done a half-century ago.

As interest in family therapy proliferated, its findings needed to be communicated and categorized. Nathan W. Ackerman and Don D. Jackson, two directors of institutes that dominated the field in the late 1950's, founded the *Family Process* journal in 1962. This was the first publication to deal primarily with family therapy. Two earlier journals dealt more with the traditional family environment. Founded in the ensuing 25 years were twelve additional American journals, eight American publications and newsletters, three non-U.S. English language journals, thirteen foreign language journals, and numerous other foreign publications..This does not cover the multitude of related articles in non family oriented journals (Siuzuki, 1987). The information surge and the need to compare approaches led to classification schemes.

Kolevzon and Green (1985) devote Chapter 2 of their book to attempts made since 1962 to classify family therapies. Alan Guerman and David Knidsen (1981) organized their *Handbook of Family Therapy* according to a twelve-fold format. Their approaches are grouped into four major schools of family therapy:

- A. The psychoanalytic and objects relations approaches;**
- B. The intergenerational approaches;**
- C. The systems theory approaches; and**
- D. The behavioral approaches.**

Auserwald (1987) offered another more general classification scheme:

- (1) Psychodynamic paradigm;**
- (2) Family system paradigm;**
- (3) General systems paradigm;**
- (4) Cybernetic paradigm; and**
- (5) Ecological systems paradigm.**

As the field of family therapy developed, classifications received much attention.

This is not a comparative paper and the above lists are only included to illustrate the depth and breath of the family therapy movement that began after World War II. Bowen stood out among these pioneers and developed a theory that not only informed psychotherapists but has been adopted by many organizations outside the mental health field to explain how people perform in groups.

In 1962, twenty-one pioneers in family therapy were ranked by practicing family therapists as most affecting their practices (Kolevzon & Green, 1985, p. 27). Five pioneers stand out: Virginia Satir, Nathan Ackerman, Don Jackson, Jay Haley, and Murray Bowen. Of these five, Murray Bowen and Nathaniel Ackerman both have roots at the Menninger Clinic in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Both were trained physicians and psychoanalysts and shifted to family therapy, although they fathered different schools. This paper will address Murray Bowen and not contrast different approaches. The literature is replete with descriptive and comparative material about family therapy (Kolverson & Green, 1985; Wolman & Stricker, 1983; Guerman & Kniskern, 1981).

Murray Bowen

Murray Bowen began his early work with schizophrenics at the Menninger Clinic, from 1946 to 1954. Bowen studied the dyad of the mother and her schizophrenic child while he had them both living in a research unit at the Menninger clinic. Bowen then moved to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), where he resided from 1954 to 1959. At the NIMH Bowen extended his hypothesis to include the father-mother-child triad and, remarkably, he had the whole family hospitalized. This triadic relationship is crucial to the Bowen Family Systems Theory, or, more succinctly, the Bowen Theory. In 1959, he moved, again, to Georgetown University, where he remained until his death on October 10, 1990, of lung cancer. Incidentally, Bowen is the only family therapy still having a personal name associated with a theory.

In 1978 Murray Bowen published his only book, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, coalescing his work of the prior 20 years, 1957 to 1977. This book is primarily a compilation of his publications over two decades. Journal articles and books reference Bowen's original publications, but they are all reproduced in his book, so the chapters, not the original sources, are referenced in this paper.

C. Margaret Hall, also of Georgetown University, published *The Bowen Family Theory and It's Uses*, in 1981. Her "interpretation" is a more organized and coherent book length coverage of Bowen Theory than is his own book. For some unknown reason, she is not generally referenced or cited as an authority on Murray Bowen. Nevertheless, I found her easy reading, a good start to examining the Bowen Theory, and she collaborated with Murray Bowen.

Perhaps the best start, using a primary source, is Philip Guerin's *Family Therapy: Theory and Practice* (1976), Chapter 4, which was written by Murray Bowen. It is concise and very readable, and in the founder's own words. In addition, excellent handbooks, textbooks and summaries have been published in the 1980's, explaining Murray Bowen's and the other family therapies (Kolverson & Green, 1985; Wolman & Stricker, 1983; Kerr, 1981).

Bowen Theory

The family therapy field and Bowen Family Systems Theory is now extensive and comprising several working concepts. This paper follows the Bowen Theory as it evolved and developed. The following hierarchical orders of Murray Bowen's working concepts pretty much follow his development sequence.

1. TRIANGLES

- fusion and distancing
- adequate and inadequate spouse

2. DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF

- fusion or differentiation
- solid self or pseudo self
- intellectual and emotional functioning

3. NUCLEAR FAMILY EMOTIONAL PROCESS

- maternal conflict
- inadequate or overadequate spouses
- emotional divorce

4. FAMILY PROJECTION PROCESS

- child focus or triangle child
- identified or designated patient

5. MULTI GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION PROCESSES

- compounding effects
- schizophrenia

6. SIBLING POSITION

- Toman's Family Constellation

7. EMOTIONAL CUTOFF

- Family of origin

8. EMOTIONAL PROCESSES IN SOCIETY (SOCIETAL REGRESSION)

Work on a ninth concept, involving the functional aspect of human spirituality, is referred to in a footnote in Wolman and Stricker (1983, p. 139). No publications were found describing Murray Bowen's further development of a spiritual concept. The first five concepts are part of Bowen's original working concepts. The sixth was based on the publication of Walter Toman's first edition of *Family Constellation: Its Effect on Personality and Social Behavior*, published in 1961, and which is now in the fourth edition. Two concepts, seven and eight, were added in 1975 (Bowen, 1976).

This paper will describe the working concepts as I understand them. The references already cited give the founder's, students', and disciples' explanations quite adequately. Golann (1987 pp. 331-332) is quoted here just to let the reader know that I realize "a description of family therapy interactions by an observer provides information primarily about the observer in fact tells us more about the person holding that belief than it does about descriptions of family interaction or about family therapy described!" Therefore, the reader is encouraged to go to the sources mentioned above.

The last paragraph reflects insight provided by psychoanalysts. A mental process, called countertransference, interjects personal views into the works of all secondary authors. This is why students are encouraged to read primary sources, in order to start from a purer base. Otherwise, multiple interpretations lead down a road demonstrated by the popular children's game "telephone."

Triangles

Bowen (1976) considered differentiation and triangles the crux of his theory. He explained differentiation first and then triangles. I think triangles take precedence because they are the basis of a multi-person theory. Differentiation, discussed next, is also used as a fundamental concept in individual psychology and was historically treated with one-on-one psychotherapy.

Bowen intentionally used the word triangle rather than triad to imply his specific meaning and to avoid confusion with other triangulation concepts. Thomas Fogarty (1976), a disciple of Bowen, maintained that all people seek closeness and that to maintain that closeness and still handle anxiety they form a triangle. I am not sure that it is “intuitively obvious” why this is the case.

The following apperceptive example is from my engineering background. If we liken anxiety to an energy field, there will be resultant forces on each person in the two-person field. The force is either tolerated by the individuals or they need to move further apart to reduce it to an acceptable level. Energy is equal to work, which is force times distance (e.g., $\text{Energy} = \text{Work} = \text{Force} \times \text{Distance}$). Therefore, if the distance is kept constant, excess force will need to be displaced to another person. Thereby some energy is redirected to maintain a closer distance between the parents.

Psychologists explain the twosome avoids confrontation by discussing their difficulties in terms of a third person. Need for repeated equalization of forces necessitates the involvement of a third party to provide counter balancing forces. Norman (not Nathan) Ackerman (1984) maintains that a twosome is inherently unstable and forms a threesome, with three give and take mutual relationships.

Every person initially interacts with one other person. (A single person is not a relationship!) A newborn child first bonds with his or her mother. Their relationship starts before birth. The mutual relationship between mother and child remains calm until there is stress requiring outside help.

Two people alone having an imbalance cannot equate their forces, for example, of fusion and distancing, discussed later. Couples on their own often *oscillate* between closeness and distance. A triangle is the smallest possible relationship system that can be in balance in a time of stress.

Therefore, to stabilize a relationship, the dyad must involve a third party to help it maintain its closeness. The third person assumes an outside position. In periods of stress, the outside position is the most comfortable and desired position. The inside position is plagued by anxiety, along with its emotional closeness. The outsider serves to preserve the inside couple's relationship.

In other words, a two-person system can only exist alone as long as there is calm. When stress is encountered, the minimum outsider interaction needed is one person, which forms a triangle. To maintain its harmony, the dyad enlists the most vulnerable other person with whom to triangulate. When the tension is greater than the three can handle, additional outside triangles are formed.

More than three people resolve themselves into multiple triangles. For example, four people, a, b, c and d, would form triangles, abc, abd, bcd and cda. Outsiders become involved when the family system has more stress than it can handle. Extended triangles can be formed with police, ministers, therapists, social workers, outside family, support groups, et al.

Triangles with moderate tension usually have one side in conflict and two comfortable sides. A common father-mother-child triangle may have tension between the parents where a weak father reinforces conflict between a dominant mother and a possibly traumatized child. Bowen calls the weak person in the marriage inadequate and the strong person overadequate. Neither strength or weakness is a better state, because they are equally undifferentiated states of the spouses. These concepts will be developed further in the following discussion.

Differentiation

Differentiation and its antithesis, fusion, are Bowen's terms to describe the extent to which people are able to separate their emotional and intellectual spheres. Highly fused people function automatically and respond emotionally to life situations. On the opposite end of the spectrum are highly differentiated people who have an autonomous intellectual system that can keep control over their emotional system.

Differentiated people respond better to life's stresses. Adequate thinking controls emotionality, but still allows human emotions. High differentiation allows both the intellectual and emotional systems to function appropriately, but fusion lets the emotional system take control all actions.

In times of relative calm, undifferentiated families may appear to function normally, but stress causes them to break down. An undifferentiated parent may make an excellent employee outside the home by being reliable, dependable, and a follower. *Highly fused people look outside themselves for direction.* In the family they look for the family unit to provide direction. Bowen originally called this the undifferentiated family ego mass, to describe actions that took place solely for and because of family expectations.

A differentiated self is described by Bowen (1976) as solid self, and fused self is called pseudo self. The solid self knows what it needs and desires, while the pseudo self reacts to those around it. In an unhealthy relationship two pseudo selves come together and fuse into each other, one person losing and the other person gaining self. The solid self, however, maintains its individuality and does not merge. The solid self has beliefs, opinions, convictions and life principles (Bowen, 1976). The pseudo self operates by rules, customs and expectations, and does not know what it truly believes.

The pseudo self is a product of emotional pressure and *every group in society exerts pressure on its members to conform.* A pseudo self may belong to groups with inconsistent ideals, but does not know why it feels uneasy, being unaware of its own beliefs. A solid self may belong to the same groups, but is aware of the contradictions and rationally choose to belong.

In a marriage the two pseudo selves merge and the dominant one gains at the expense of the other. Moderately undifferentiated couples can appear to function reasonably well and appear differentiated when times are well, but can resemble highly fused families with low levels of functioning when anxiety is high.

Bowen developed a differentiation scale from zero (0) to 100, corresponding to low to high differentiation, with profiles to go along with the rating. He abandoned the attempt to refine this scale when he realized that it was not understood and threatened his theoretical concept of differentiation levels. The concept of levels of differentiation in a differentiation-fusion spectrum is useful, but the absolute quantification and possible prediction of future events are not required. Appreciation of the nuances of the scale requires studying the examples in Bowen (1978, Ch. 21).

It needs to be emphasized that control of the thought process and not manifestation of behavior that is being described. A quote from Murray Bowen (1978) might be helpful to put differentiation in perspective: "I consider rugged individualism to be an exaggerated pretend posture of a person struggling against emotional fusion. The differentiated person is always aware of others and the relationship system around him." Differentiated behavior is not inappropriate or extreme on any axis of behavior. Differentiated people can laugh, cry, have fun and enjoy relationships. They can also have a breakdown if sufficient pressure is presented, but they recover quickly.

Nuclear family emotional process

The nuclear family emotional system describes the family's emotional system during a single generation. This pattern, however, was already replicated for generations. Father and mother interaction will follow the patterns of their parents and will pass the patterns on to their children.

Murray Bowen considered marriage to be the beginning of the nuclear family relationship and he discounted other living arrangements. He felt that the true fusion does not begin if there is the option to terminate the relationship. Bowen does not consider that exceptions to the rules, which are always present, are sufficient to disprove his conclusions. At some time in the wedding process, be it the engagement, the ceremony, or the first home, the fusion will inevitably be initiated.

It is critical that the spouses be at an equal level of differentiation. Note the point made above that it is not the behavioral manifestation, but the emotional control of the intellectual process, that determines the level of differentiation. There is an inverse relationship between the level of differentiation and emotional fusion; that is, high differentiation equals low fusion and vice versa. Bowen does not elaborate on possibilities of marriages between unbalanced levels of spouses.

Too much fusion in the couple can result in anxiety for one or both parties. The most common way of dealing with this stress is emotional distance or emotional divorce (Bowen, Ch. 3). Three other methods of compensation are common: marital conflict, sickness or dysfunction in one of the spouses, and projection of the problem into one of the children. These are means to dampen energy.

Compensation strategies exist uniquely or in various combinations, but usually sickness of a spouse is outwardly harmonious and a relatively placid situation. Dysfunction of one spouse provides an effective means of absorbing anxiety and produces enduring marriages, but it does require one of the pair to sacrifice his or her health.

With a triangle, the third member absorbs extra energy that arises between the primary dyad, thereby allowing the couple to maintain closeness. A key point is that the conflict tends to localize in the weakest and most inadequate person in the triangle (Bowen, Ch. 3). Conflicting spouses are unable to adapt, but have periods of intense closeness. Impairment of the children is important enough to be considered a separate working concept as it eventually may progress from mild neurosis to severe psychopathology.

Family projection

Two outside influences affect the degree of adaptation required by the triad: (1) the emotional relationship of the nuclear family to its extended family, and (2) the level of anxiety that is externally applied. Unresolved emotional differences and anxiety increase psychopathology.

The undifferentiated energy toward the grandparents is either resolved or absorbed in the present relationship. If the parents do not resolve the energy imbalance unto themselves it is projected onto the children. A child may be relatively symptom-free if the parents do not directly involve him or her in the emotional field. It is also possible to have one child who is symptom free and another child who is affected. For many reasons children are not treated equally in a family.

The child's emotional field usually revolves around his or her mother. She is the one most directly involved in reproduction and develops the primary attachment. The father is necessary, however, to provide support to the projection process.

The emergence of severe symptoms may not manifest themselves until a later stage in the child's development, such as adolescence or moving away from the security of the home.

Multi generational transmission process

Bowen's theory considers the child's symptoms to be intensified over multiple generations until they appear as schizophrenia. Neurosis and schizophrenia are just considered to be different positions on the psychic continuum extending from normalcy to acute psychosis. Each dysfunctional family that triangulates the children will carry it on because family patterns are repeated.

Each generation will ratchet down the level of differentiation and will increase the severity of emotional illness. Severe manifestations of emotional illness will be self-limiting because procreation stops with severe psychosis. Lieberman (1981) discusses some ways that families react together in transgenerational interaction, such as having "family secrets."

The term patient is not used by Bowen, because he believed that children are affected by the emotional demands of the triangle, and not genetically predispositioned to malfunction. Clinically, Bowenians used identified or designated patient, or simply the triangle child. The family may use a physical or mental impairment, a birth trauma, or birth order to select the target child. Then they all conspire to use this agreed upon scapegoat to focus and balance their energy.

Sibling Position

After the publication of Walter Toman's first book, *Family Constellation: its Effects on Personality and Social Behavior*, in 1961. Murray Bowen added sibling position to his concepts. Toman's work provided Bowen with data indicating why a particular child might be chosen for triangulation. Bowen (1976) wrote that "no single piece of data is more important than knowing the sibling position of people in the present or past generation" (p. 87).

Emotional cutoff

Emotional cutoff was added to the Bowen Theory, in 1975, because it was not adequately covered when it was an informal extension of other concepts. Merely terminating a past relationship did not end its affect on future relationships. It must be worked through. Unresolved emotional attachments to past generations will continue to plague future performance.

Bowen (1976) believes "the person who runs away from his family of origin is as emotionally dependent as the one who never leaves home" (p. 86). The runaway needs emotional contact but negatively reacts to it. Running away will become a coping pattern in future relationships, such as marriage. Bowen asserts that "the more a nuclear family maintains some kind of contact with the past generations, the more orderly and asymptomatic the life process in both generations" (p. 85). Avoiding cutoffs is more in the area of therapy and will not be belabored here.

Emotional process in society

Societal regression was added to the theory in 1975 and essentially extends triangles outside the immediate family domain. Essentially society, also, has emotional forces that tend to diminish intellectual functioning, and chronic anxiety of the times will reinforce fusion. It is assumed that societal influences follow the major concepts of the Bowen Family Systems Theory.

This concept expands the usefulness of Bowen Theory beyond the family to everyday life in the community and organizations. Like families, groups often operate at an emotional level with undifferentiated people who triangulate and make irrational decisions. Knowing this can help in developing strategies to influence the undifferentiated ego mass of the group. Failing this, frustration can be reduced by observing the process, identifying triangles and assessing differentiation.

Bowen Therapy

Individual psychotherapy deals with intrapsychic forces and treats the patient in a one-to-one relationship. In the therapeutic setting, repetition of prior emotional reactions, called transference, is important. Family therapy deals with the present interrelationship patterns of the family.

Different schools relate to the family unit and its members in various ways. Bowen is the only family therapist who insists that the therapist avoid operation within the family's emotional sphere (Bowen, 1978, Ch. 10; Guerin & Kriskern, 1981). The other methods operate within the emotional arena. Some therapists have difficulty divorcing themselves from the emotional underpinnings of their long training. The Bowenian therapist is more of a supervisor, teacher, and coach (Bowen, 1978, Ch. 14) who remains free to observe the emotional happenings of the family.

Communication between the members of the family is key to Bowen's therapy. While confidentiality is fundamental in individual psychotherapy, the group therapist must elicit trust by not colluding with a secret of a particular family member. To do so would be triangulation.

The Bowenian therapist's relationship to his or her own family is important. The therapist must observe their family's process. Bowen encouraged his therapists to interact and relate to their own family and to analyze the triangulation. The purpose of interacting with the extended family members is not to "tell them off" or to promote togetherness, but to understand the dynamics. Guerin and Fogarty (1973) described ways to use one's own family to develop self-awareness.

Discussion

Murray Bowen's theory is comprehensive and based upon his long clinical research. He is a firm believer that a cogent theory must underlie therapeutic actions. He expressed concern that there was never a solid connection of psychoanalysis to the accepted sciences (Bowen, 1978, Ch. 10). He had an interest in the natural sciences, particularly biology, from where he developed his differentiation concepts. Therapeutic metaphors are often based upon concrete knowledge.

My background as a mechanical engineer steeped me in Newtonian mechanics. It is possible to look at emotional conflict as a force triangle with emotional actions and reactions, where no two bodies can resolve dynamic forces without a third body. Specifically, triangles lend themselves to a vector analysis way of looking at family energy. Some interesting intuitive models of vector components can lead to further appreciation of the theory. For example, a truss bridge has interacting triangles distributing forces that enable it to span great distances.

Bowen's differentiation models assumed that each spouse was quantitatively equal in their amount of differentiation. Some interesting hypotheses are possible for unbalanced fusion levels. For instance, was Pygmalion¹ a relationship between equally differentiated people? Do Edith and Archie Bunker, in *All in the Family*, have the same level of differentiation? What about "Meathead?" (Remember, it is the level of independence and not presentation or education that is determinant.)

Also, is differentiation always a viable option for society and the business world? I observe that many people are chosen for management precisely because they are undifferentiated. Undifferentiated people can often have great intellectual capabilities in settings that are not emotionally threatening. Goodness or badness of differentiation as a personality trait may depend upon the situation.

By observing activities without engagement in the emotional sphere of the group, it may be possible to influence its direction. When change is not forthcoming, at least you will have a better understanding of the process.

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Endnotes

1. George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*.
(Basis for *My Fair Lady*).