

## Natural Systems Study and Society in Trouble

Human behavior, *operating at the level of automatic responses to anxiety and population density*, can often be addressed usefully through the lens of research with other mammals. Space and density challenges are outlined carefully in scientific research with other mammals. It seems that each species has a range of possibilities for handling social density. Several researchers have identified the number of relationships that a species can handle cognitively and temperamentally as well. When that number is exceeded for a specific species, certain behaviors are predictable, e.g. aggressiveness and less cooperation, less orderly social behaviors, hyper-sexualized behavior, and more reactivity to contact of all kinds. When the density continues to grow, there is evidence of disorderly migration in which integration of new members into the social group is limited and aggression grows further. Observations are made in which large numbers of migrating, unattached males are likely to create problems for females and for established family groups. (China and northern Mexico are recently in the news with such observations.) These predictable behaviors are defined in detail by the work of the scientist, John B. Calhoun whose work was extremely popular in the late 1900's. After his death in 1995, a few people are continuing to make use of his careful research and its application to human life.

The human ability to handle density challenges is important in dealing with current societal regression. Calhoun's careful studies of human population "doubling" across the planet in different epochs described the human's ability to manage higher and higher levels of density by creating what he calls "conceptual space". That is, with creative responses to these dilemmas, humans have discovered the ability to form new roles and structures to manage the demands of increased density. The various epochs in which there were dramatic shifts in human societal structures show the human ability to evolve a different style of life that can effectively manage the population demands. For example, the shift from hunter/gatherers to agriculture developed a set of new roles and structures. Several such developments associated with "population doublings" are outlined in Calhoun's work. (See "Space and the Strategy for Life") A fairly recent development, the evolution of new communication systems within the electronic revolution shows additional new roles and structures that assist in communication in the face of density. However, the next stage of population doubling is already upon us and the general population has not taken on the often unrecognized challenges of population density, disappeared frontiers, and decreasing resources.

Current careful assessment of these challenges notes that the population "doubling" is taking place more and more rapidly than ever in human history. The resulting anxiety seems to hinder the thoughtful development of new structures and new "conceptual space" in the time available. Without the human possibility for creative thinking, the adaptation to this increasingly "enclosed universe" is problematic. Could it be that our own anxiety is the problem hindering this creative thinking?

Enter another natural systems thinker, Murray Bowen. Bowen's observation of the human behavioral repertoire in emotional systems shows that automatic behaviors in humans that are as predictable as in other animals. Generally, basic survival and reproduction are possible using our automatic behavior patterns. However, creative thinking and creative problem solving are often out of the question when anxiety is high.

Bowen's use of the term anxiety is much broader than "psychiatric" thinking. Bowen's use of anxiety deals generally with changes in an organism's autonomic nervous system, central nervous system and behavior that are automatically engaged in response to *threat* of any kind. Bowen distinguished between acute anxiety and chronic anxiety that have different results in life. Humans generally do well in response to acute anxiety which is often a response to a real and immediate threat. The response is time-limited in the body and brain. Chronic anxiety, on the other hand, often leaves the organism with a level of heightened reactivity that may or may not be recognized and has long term effects on the individual and group. The ability of the human to engage clear and rational thinking is severely altered by this kind of anxiety or emotion.

Systems thinking can provide an increased ability for the human to use thinking (concepts) and careful observations to consider our own automatic behavior patterns under stress. This ability can be a step toward developing new roles and structures at a time of increased danger for the human and the planet. If the social density and/or imbalance with nature are part of the problem, recognizing our chronic anxiety in the process, dealing with our automatic reactivity, and restoring careful thinking could help the human define constructive action.

As early as the 1950's while observing early stages in the current societal regression, Bowen predicted that we would increasingly fall into extremes or polarizations that would make organizations and governments increasingly unworkable. He speculated on the underlying factors in this regression. Primarily, he noted the chronic anxiety found in our biological (often subliminal) awareness of the planet's finite resources and our deeply programmed response to human's imbalance with nature. This plus the population density he speculated could be among the primary factors putting us into a spiral of severe societal regression in which behavior is more and more determined by the automatic emotional processes present in all of life. (While it is possible to recognize this process in human behavior, it is often possible to see this better, in other mammals)

Natural systems thinkers and theories can provide people with a direction for constructive action. Making use of Bowen's cornerstone concept of "differentiation of self" can be a major direction for motivated people. The process of differentiation of self, taking a hard look at one's own behavior and attitudes and making necessary changes while staying connected to others, seems to be one of the most constructive actions available to all. This process of differentiation, however, runs counter to our automatic reactions under stress, and requires careful study, discipline, and motivation to pursue.

A further step of study and analysis can lead to more courage and determination to "grow up" in response to our current societal and personal dilemmas. The study of natural systems can lead the way to understanding where we as a species may currently fall in this process. Calhoun's experiments with mice in an "enclosed universe" gives some indicators of the range of possibilities that we face when human anxiety (perhaps also related to our own limited frontiers and limited differentiation) puts us into the world simply on "automatic" reactivity.

Dealing with the challenge to reduce this anxiety, first, seems to require a way to bring more people into contact with productive ideas and with possibilities for their lives. CSNSF programs in EI

Paso, TX and Cd. Juarez, MX make an effort to do this. Among the most productive ideas are *systems thinking* where the “big picture” is easier to see, and *differentiation of self* which open new windows on possibilities for one’s creative action in the world.

Next, using Calhoun’s words, the effort to find new roles and structures can form a part of newly conceived human “conceptual space.” Clearly, people who want to work in that direction will have to recognize their own vulnerability to chronic anxiety and learn how to manage “self” in the present anxious climate without contributing to more societal anxiety and distress . If there could ever be 51% of the people learning to manage their reactivity, it will perhaps be possible to provide new collaborative opportunities, with each of us connected around many “nodes” in the networks that allow space for viable, thinking connections. (We can see hints of possibilities in the internet, in wikipedia etc.) Bowen suggested that the current crises would continue to increase in frequency and severity until the complications of the regression are greater than the anxiety that feeds the regression.

Beyond these developments, there are multiple examples of people who are moving in such a direction in creative developments around the world, but clearly, most of these people are outside the mainstream in most societies. The study of examples such as the women’s peace movement in Lyberia offer opportunities to study such leadership and clear thinking in the midst of high chronic anxiety. Obviously, this result is rare and worthy of note. Steady work, though, involving the creative, thoughtful people in a better understanding of ourselves, our own dilemmas and possibilities can be an important contribution to creative action that may be able to help the human get through the “eye of the needle” of societal regression and planetary crises. The CSNSF programs in El Paso/Juarez and Houston hope to make a contribution in that direction.

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