

A Bowenian Approach to Family Therapy
Akeelah Anderson's Case Vignette and Treatment Plan
Based on the characters from the movie "Akeelah & The Bee"

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Case Formulation

Demographics

Akeelah Anderson is an 11-year-old cisgender female of Black descent. She is currently in the seventh grade at Crenshaw Middle School in South Los Angeles, California. Akeelah was raised by a single, widowed mother in a predominantly Black, working-class neighborhood. She is the youngest of four children.

Social and Family History

Akeelah lives with her widowed mother (Mrs. Anderson); older, unmarried sister (Kiana); sister's baby daughter; oldest brother (Devon); and next oldest brother (Terrence). While no one in Akeelah's immediate family has a known history of psychiatric problems, Akeelah's family members' lives have unfortunately been adversely impacted by various forms of racial injustice. Akeelah's father was shot and killed when Akeelah was six years old under unknown circumstances on his way home from work. His death was likely related to either systemic police brutality against Black people or to the high crime rates of their socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood (DiAngelo, 2018); in either instance, his death was tragic, unexpected, and probably linked directly or indirectly to his racial identity, which increased his odds of dying as a victim of urban gun violence (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Akeelah's mother, meanwhile, briefly attended college on a scholarship before discontinuing her studies due to personal insecurities associated with her doubly marginalized status as a Black woman at an institution of higher education. Because of her position as a widow and single parent of four with no college degree, Mrs. Anderson works long hours and has limited time to provide Akeelah with academic support. Devon is in the Air Force, and Terrence does not prioritize his schooling and spends much of his time cutting school and engaging in delinquent behaviors.

Many of the stressors in Akeelah's life are related to her social location as a Black girl residing in a low-SES community of color. Her public school is underfunded, low-performing, and in poor physical condition. Akeelah faces substantial pressure from educational administrators to excel academically in order to secure more funding for her middle school. She is teased for her academic ability by her peers, has few friends, and (until recently) has had limited family support for her educational aspirations. Mrs. Anderson initially discouraged Akeelah from participating in the state and Scripps National spelling bees. She was unsure of whether to allow Akeelah to enter partly due to her fear of her daughter's potential failure (mirroring her own academic insecurities). Her spelling coach, Dr. Larabee, provided significant emotional and academic support to Akeelah as she prepared for the spelling bee, but his recent withdrawal of services has left Akeelah feeling more isolated. Akeelah does, however, have a new friend and budding romantic interest, a boy her age she met through spelling bees.

Developmental, Medical, and Physical Health Information

Akeelah appears to be in good health, and her therapist should inquire as to whether she sees a pediatrician and receives regular medical checkups. Due to her intellectual giftedness, Akeelah skipped second grade and is only 11 years old in seventh grade. Consequently, she is physically smaller and less mature than most of her middle school classmates. Importantly, even though she experienced the sudden and traumatic loss of her father in first grade, she was able to excel academically the following year, when she skipped a grade, entering third grade at the age of seven. Akeelah yearns to feel a sense of belonging in her middle school environment but stands out because of her young age and remarkable academic potential.

Presenting Issues; Problematic Behaviors or Concerns; and Onset, Duration, and Known Triggers

Since Akeelah's talent for spelling was discovered by educational and administrative staff approximately seven months ago, Akeelah has been skipping class and academically underperforming in spite of her high academic potential. This led to her enrollment in summer school last summer. Because Mrs. Anderson did not initially support Akeelah's spelling bee ambitions, Akeelah lied to her mother about spelling bee-related activities. She additionally forged her deceased father's signature to participate in a spelling bee. Her grades took an especially sharp plummet after her spelling coach Dr. Larabee suddenly discontinued lessons with her about three months ago, engendering strong feelings of sadness and abandonment.

The lack of relational support Akeelah has experienced from significant people in her life — including her mother, Mrs. Anderson, and her spelling coach Dr. Larabee — has added to her despondency and lack of confidence in herself. Akeelah has struggled with feeling socially isolated since starting middle school. Her relationship with her best friend has been particularly strained for the past seven months of spelling competitions. During this same timeframe, her peers have teased her for being a “smart girl,” which has directly contributed to her feelings of insecurity, lack of belonging, and dislike of her middle school. Her mother yelled at her when she discovered her slipping grades and spelling bee participation, and her brother Terrence regularly devalues her academic strengths. Moreover, she recently overheard another spelling contestant's father making racist remarks about her. These kinds of hurtful social interactions have been harmful to Akeelah's emotional development and have triggered the acting-out behaviors mentioned above.

Most recently, Akeelah experienced a crying spell last week in front of her mother that lasted a few minutes in which she expressed high levels of anxiety. She told Mrs. Anderson that she is feeling tremendous pressure to succeed in the Scripps National Spelling Bee as a representative of her school and community. Mrs. Anderson has now agreed to support Akeelah in her spelling bee activities, but Akeelah still feels sad, anxious, and unsure of herself.

Consideration of Appropriate Diagnosis or Categorization of Client's Problem/Situation, Including Cultural and Developmental Factors in Symptom Presentation and Diagnosis

According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), or *DSM-5*, Akeelah qualifies for a diagnosis of 309.24 (F43.22) Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety. She exhibits the following predominant symptoms: nervousness, worry, and jitteriness. Criteria for this diagnosis are met through consideration of the emotional or behavioral symptoms in response to an identifiable stressor(s) occurring within 3 months of the onset of the stressor(s). This is exemplified as Akeelah steps into her new, high-profile role as spelling bee contestant and representative of her socially disadvantaged community. The withdrawal of Dr. Larabee's coaching services exacerbated her discomfort and contributed to feelings of loneliness. In addition, Akeelah meets the diagnostic criteria for Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety by demonstrating significant impairment in her social functioning, as seen in her recent isolation from her best friend and peers and her strained relationship with her mother. In addition, Akeelah's stress-related disturbance does not meet the criteria for another mental disorder and is not merely an exacerbation of a preexisting mental disorder, as Akeelah has no known history of mental health issues.

Contextualizing Akeelah within her cultural and developmental background is crucial in understanding the appropriateness of her responses to the stressors within her environment. As

Akeelah steps into her new role, she finds herself at odds with some of the cultural expectations of her community. Akeelah comes from a family and peer group that are initially hesitant to throw their support behind her due partly to their marginalized, low-SES status. This has created significant anxiety and discomfort for Akeelah, who feels torn between “fitting in” and achieving her full academic potential. In addition, the middle school years are generally thought to be a period in which peer approval is considered important for optimal social development; a lack of belonging can contribute to issues of anxiety and low self-esteem (Smith-Adcock & Tucker, 2017). Akeelah “acting-out” behaviors of skipping class and neglecting her studies are common in puberty and adolescence, signifying problems on both personal and systemic levels (Smith-Adcock & Tucker, 2017).

Additionally, Akeelah presents with the following V-code: V60.2 (Z59.6) Low income. Her symptoms can be interpreted, at least in part, as a reflection of the lack of resources and opportunities that accompanies her socially disadvantaged status. It is apparent to both Akeelah and her therapist that her family’s limited material resources put her at a disadvantage in spelling competitions against her more privileged peers from areas of greater affluence like Woodland Hills. Akeelah has disclosed to her therapist that her family cannot afford to supply her with new clothes or study materials to assist in spelling bee preparation. This serves as a painful reminder of what her family and broader community materially lack.

Conceptualization of Presenting Problem Grounded in Theory

Murray Bowen’s family systems approach informed by elements of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory can shed light on Akeelah’s presenting problems. Akeelah’s Black racial status has created significant, culturally based stressors grounded in her *macrosystem* (McLinden, 2017). Within this context, the macrosystem can be defined as the broad societal

attitudes and ideologies that characterize Akeelah's 21st-century American culture (McLinden, 2017). Akeelah and her community face systemic and institutionalized racism as low-income people of color residing in a high-crime area (DiAngelo, 2018); the people in Akeelah's community (known as her *exosystem*) are economically disempowered and face harsher living conditions that make them less likely than their European-American counterparts to achieve high-quality education, economic success, or political power (DiAngelo, 2018; McLinden, 2017). Her father's untimely death as a victim of gun violence is a reflection of how her macrosystem (American culture) has impacted her exosystem (South Los Angeles neighborhood/community), which has trickled down to affect her *microsystem* (or her immediate environment – in this case, her nuclear family) (McLinden, 2017). In addition to causing the emotional pain of grief, the early loss of Akeelah's father has placed financial stress on her mother, resulting in her more limited support of Akeelah's academic ambitions. Furthermore, Akeelah's status as a low-SES person of color has produced stressors embedded within the microsystem of her school (DiAngelo, 2018); Akeelah has not been given access to a quality education, and the prospect of being a "smart girl" at her predominantly Black school has led to ridicule from her peers and next oldest brother.

According to a Bowenian perspective, Akeelah has not been able to achieve a *solid self* due to her low *differentiation*. Differentiation refers to an individual's ability to strike a healthy balance between individuation and closeness to other family members (McDowell et al., 2018). As described above, Akeelah was born into a country (macrosystem) with a racially troubled history. This has generated a complex, pre-existing source of anxiety that was transmitted intergenerationally to Akeelah, who must bear the legacy of institutionalized racism. Education is a sensitive topic for Mrs. Anderson, whose decision to drop out of college was directly tied to

her feelings of insecurity as a Black woman in a university setting. The prospect of her daughter achieving academic success is triggering for her since it resurrects her own insecurity, perceived failure, and anger at social prejudice. Via the *family projection process*, Akeelah receives the fallout of her mother's culturally based emotional distress in the form of her mother's lack of support (McDowell et al., 2018). Consequently, Akeelah experiences *emotional fusion* with her mother, or a maladaptive boundary that has led to lower differentiation and poorer mental health (McDowell et al., 2018).

As such, Akeelah has become more emotionally reactive since entering high-stakes spelling competitions, experiencing anxiety and engaging in behaviors like truancy and poor school performance that express her inner struggles. In addition, a *triangle* has formed between Akeelah, Mrs. Anderson, and Dr. Larabee in which Dr. Larabee has been pulled into their mother-daughter dyad to relieve high interpersonal tension between mother and child. This is especially significant given Dr. Larabee's role as a father figure in Akeelah's life; thus, his sudden refusal to act as Akeelah's spelling coach was especially painful for her.

In summary, changes in Akeelah's family and community systems created imbalances that brought various traumas and forms of anxiety to the foreground, resulting in Akeelah's feelings of overwhelm and recent, uncharacteristic acting-out behavior. There has been a collision of problems embedded within systems, resulting in a seemingly benign event – a spelling bee – throwing Akeelah off-balance but also providing the opportunity for change and healing. When combined with Akeelah's developmental position at the precipice of adolescence (and the mother-daughter relational tension that commonly accompanies the middle school years), she is experiencing notable life stressors that have led to feelings of isolation and contributed to her symptoms.

Treatment Plan

Treatment Goals for Client and Family

Working from a Bowenian family framework considers not only identifying and solving presenting problems, but also building a mindset that is sensitive to individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with the problem's resolution (Amatea & Watson, 2017). In rooting treatment in a Bowenian family systems framework, Akeelah is supported in reaching treatment goals defined as: 1) achieving greater differentiation in order to create a stronger solid self among her family members, 2) reducing and eliminating triangulation within her relationships with Mrs. Anderson and Dr. Larabee/the school principal, and 3) developing a positive community system support network. Working with Akeelah to achieve higher differentiation is expected to decrease feelings of anxiety. Additionally, working with Akeelah to reduce the triangles that have formed around her relationship with her mother will result in a healthier process of individuation. Finally, working with Akeelah to develop a positive community system support network can be measured through increased positive communication between Akeelah and members of her broader community, such as peers who support her academic endeavors.

Who Will be Included in Treatment

It is important to address the various relationships in Akeelah's life that can support her throughout treatment and empower her to make healthier choices. Therapy will begin with an intake interview with both Akeelah and Mrs. Anderson. According to Patterson et al. (2018), "[t]he most crucial task in the first session [is for you to successfully join with your clients]" (p. 24). This is an important aspect of building the initial therapeutic alliance, entering into Akeelah's family system, and learning more about Akeelah as a unique cultural being. Akeelah's family therapist will come to therapy with genuine curiosity regarding each family member's

experiences in order to facilitate rapport-building. Following the intake, therapy will include Akeelah and Mrs. Anderson with perhaps a few individual sessions with Akeelah and Mrs. Anderson as needed. Additionally, treatment will sporadically include other family members where appropriate (e.g. while the family system processes the tragic passing of Akeelah's father).

Patterson et al. (2018) note that when a child from a single-parent family enters therapy, the therapist "will benefit by identifying and addressing these challenges, most notably the possibility of financial stress and the fact that many single-parents families are coping with loss, whether it be the loss of a partner/coparent or the loss of a dream about a family's future" (p. 152). Addressing these economic and single-parent challenges in working with the Anderson family will inform the ways in which the therapist approaches the presenting problems. Therefore, holding space for the whole family system to come into therapy can be beneficial in achieving Akeelah's — or the identified patient's — treatment goals. Furthermore, involving Akeelah's family members in treatment will assist in the processing of intergenerational trauma, the delineation of cultural values, and the therapist's grasp of relevant systems in Akeelah's life.

In considering clients' systems, it is important to not only identify family systems, but also systems outside of the household. Therefore, Dr. Larabee can be brought into session if Akeelah and Mrs. Anderson believe this would be helpful. When considering the impact of her father's passing and Dr. Larabee's abrupt discontinuation of lessons, this could provide Akeelah with the opportunity to redefine her understanding of ending relationships. At Akeelah and Mrs. Anderson's discretion, Dr. Larabee, the school principal, and teachers working with Akeelah could be updated on treatment progress through phone call consultations. However, it is also

vital to consider issues of confidentiality and to respect Akeelah's boundaries by only providing Dr. Larabee and school staff with information that is clinically relevant and appropriate.

Treatment Interventions

Interventions for Bowenian Family Therapy

In applying Bowenian theory to Akeelah and her family, Akeelah's therapist can consider utilizing a range of interventions including creating a genogram, acknowledging and addressing intergenerational traumas and values that are being passed down, promoting individuation and differentiation among family members, reducing and eliminating triangulation, and developing a family and community system support network. These interventions need to be applied and tailored within a cultural and racial framework to make them contextually relevant and appropriate for Akeelah's family in their unique macrosystem and exosystem.

Once Akeelah's therapist has joined with the family and built rapport, the clinician can first consider creating a detailed genogram to better understand the intergenerational influences that are impacting the family today. The genogram will help the family gain deeper insight into historical patterns that may be repeating in the current generation. For example, did Mrs. Anderson's mother also display her love and concern for her daughter by becoming overprotective and limiting Mrs. Anderson's opportunities to explore and expand beyond their neighborhood? How was conflict resolved between them? What adverse experiences may have been experienced throughout the generations that instilled a sense of fear and protection in the role of the parents, thereby stifling the children's independence? The genogram can also help the family understand the specifics of how Akeelah's mother was never able to finish college, though she aspired to, and how Mrs. Anderson's fear of failure can also be motivating her to hold Akeelah back, as well. By bringing in multiple generations of the family's history, a

genogram could help to paint a picture of how these dynamics have been handed down generationally and how they impact parenting and relationships in the here and now.

The genogram can also identify and bring to life people in the family who may no longer be physically present in the family but who still exert a strong influence among family members. For example, Akeelah's father who passed away continues to have a strong, positive presence in Akeelah's life as a sort of support figure she can talk to and discuss her troubles with even though he is no longer living. Akeelah's older brother Devon is also a source of inspiration and support from afar, as he is an Air Force recruit in training. By displaying both of these family members in the detailed genogram, Akeelah can focus on the supportive family members who she can turn to and lean on in times of need.

Genograms can also serve the purpose of capturing family traditions, values, culture, and ways of thinking. This can be particularly useful for people with strong ethnic ties, such as Akeelah and her family (McCullough & Spellman, 2004). The genogram can reveal key cultural influences and values and bring these often unspoken values into the collected consciousness of the family (McCullough & Spellman, 2004). For Black clients in particular, the genogram should include "the consideration of oppression, racism, harsh social conditions, as well as sources of resilience, strength, and intergenerational interdependence" (McCullough & Spellman, 2004, p. 4). The genogram can serve the purpose of opening dialogue and discussion among family members and the therapist to facilitate conversation in the key areas of family dynamics, values, and unique considerations.

When applying a cultural perspective to the larger role of Akeelah's community and cultural identity, Akeelah's therapist can recognize that Akeelah's Black heritage has both supported and encouraged her in some ways and stifled her growth in others. On the positive

side, Akeelah has a strong network of neighbors, friends, and family (i.e. exosystem) who can show up, help her study, and cheer her on. On the other hand, her community also has components that have the potential to limit her growth, such as classmates who tease her academic successes and friends who can no longer relate to her in ways they previously relied on. By exploring these positives and negatives, Akeelah's therapist can validate the client's lived experiences and recognize the duality in her heritage. In accordance with a multiculturally sensitive approach, Akeelah's therapist can then work toward helping Akeelah align with those parts of her culture which she finds validating, helpful, and representative of her values (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). Community members can become informal teachers and spelling coaches, wrapping her in a blanket of support that highlights her Black community's remarkable strength and solidarity.

Through the lens of the genogram and cultural/racial discussions, the therapist can help the family practice active individuation to help reduce emotional fusion, especially between Akeelah and her mother. According to Bowenian theory, "differentiation of self is the core developmental process and is at the heart of therapy" (McDowell et al., 2018, p. 114). Individuals must differentiate in order to have the strength and courage to be active, positive contributors to the family dynamic. Through differentiation, the goals will be to decrease anxiety within the family, especially as it relates to the intergenerational anxiety and fear/control patterns that are being passed down from the mother. In working on the family members' differentiation, the therapist must take a socioculturally attuned view and understand that strong family connections are a central value and strength in Black families (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). These families rely on their familial connections for emotional, spiritual, and economic support; therefore we must tread carefully in this arena and not pathologize a core value of the family.

Akeelah's mother can continue to remain a central role in her children's lives while giving them the autonomy to make certain decisions for themselves and learn from their mistakes. There is a balance between individuation and fusion, and Akeelah's therapist would work with the family to find the balance that is optimal for the family system. We must also be mindful that Akeelah's mother likely grew to become fused with her children's lives when her husband died suddenly and she became the sole parental figure overnight. Whereas before, she could rely on him to help carry the burden of protecting and raising the children, she was suddenly forced into the single parent role; this likely caused anxiety in wanting to make sure she protected her children from the violence that killed her husband and surrounds their community. Her control and emotional fusion have served her to keep her children safe, and therefore she has likely relied on these techniques in her parenting. By encouraging her to take a step back and observe the impact of her dynamic — especially through the lens of the genogram, where she can see the effect of emotional fusion/enmeshment in her own life and recognize that she is continuing a pattern of behavior that may not continue to serve her children well — she can have the distance to consider a new path forward.

The therapist will work with all members of the family to help them function autonomously by making self-directed choices, while remaining emotionally connected to the strengths and supports that their family system provides (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This is the dance between being differentiated/individuated and yet a healthy part of a family system, or what Bowen describes as the ability to “maintain emotional objectivity while in the midst of an emotional system [...] yet at the same time actively relate to key people in the system” (McDowell et al., 2018, p. 114). Though this philosophy aligns more closely with a

Western/American ideal of the individualized persona, Akeelah's Black family can benefit from incorporating some individuation into their strong family connections.

What Akeelah's mother may believe is too much individuation may actually be a family coping as best as possible given the limits of their resources. This forced independence foisted on each member of the family, whether through socio-economic necessity or lack of maternal involvement due to long work hours, may have unwittingly caused more emotional fusion within the family. Anxiety related to these kinds of survival issues can manifest for generations outside conscious awareness. Because human systems are inherently social, family functioning is connected to historical sociopolitical contexts such as war, the economy, systems of stratification, privilege and marginalization, and cultural expectations (McDowell et al., 2018). In developing a treatment plan for the family, the therapist will work on establishing a true sense of individuation which is not a result of forced environmental situations, but by choice — by developing awareness of the emotional patterns in their lives, the contexts that invite them, and how their own reactivity contributes to the family dynamic.

According to Bowen, when anxiety runs high, a person's reactive responses escalate from obliviousness of others' needs to hurtful rage and anger. These responses are most likely when they are not able to live up to societal messages that they should be competent and in charge (McDowell et al., 2018). In working with the family toward differentiation, the therapist will engage with clients empathetically. This will enable them to move into a more reflective position. The goal of socioculturally attuned Bowenian therapy with Akeelah's family will be to increase individual empowerment while maintaining healthy emotional closeness so that the family members are able to make choices about how to respond to the circumstances of their lives instead of feeling like victims responding to life's blows.

As Mrs. Anderson allows Akeelah to differentiate and grow, and thereby lowers her emotional fusion with her daughter, Akeelah can reunite with her mother in a more trusted and respected relationship. As Akeelah learns to trust and rely on her mom for positive support, thereby fostering a stronger mother/daughter bond, the triangulated relationships with Dr. Larabee and the principal that had formed within Akeelah's relationship with Mrs. Anderson will no longer be necessary and will begin to resolve, also decreasing Akeelah's anxiety.

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