

The View of the Person Underlying the Theory

The theorist's view of what is common to all people.

For a theorist to be able to describe and explain human behaviour adequately, he or she must have certain opinions about or answers to such basic questions like:

*What is the meaning of life?

* What are human beings primary concerns

* What is their behaviour directed towards?

* What is the human being's place in the overall scheme of the world?

The View of the Person Underlying the Theory

A human being- a subsystem within a hierarchy of larger systems, such as the family and the community.

A person assigns meaning to everything he or she comes into contact with, and that this meaning represents 'reality' for that person

Recognises the important role played by the language a person uses when assigning meaning.

- Meaning exists solely in verbal or non-verbal language, which the person reveals to himself or herself through internal dialogue, or to others through external dialogue

The View of the Person Underlying the Theory (cont)

- The meaning a person attaches to a topic or an experience is determined by the person, and not by the topic or experience.

Self-created 'reality' thus directs behaviour.

- *The network of meanings-* the manner in which an individual looks at the world.

↳ It reflects his or her needs, wishes, goals, values and priorities; but it also represents the needs, wishes, values, ideas and beliefs of the larger systems of which the person is a part, and the interactional patterns between these systems.

Background

The ecosystemic approach is an integration of certain fields of study, such as system theory, ecology and cybernetics.

These fields of study have a number of overlapping assumptions and their epistemologies are compatible

Epistemology- a particular way of thinking, which determines how we know and understand the world around us.

Ecology- the fundamental assumption that all things in nature are related to one another in a complex but systematic way.

Background (cont)

Cybernetics deals with relationships, patterns and communication systems and the principles that govern the distribution of information.

An ecosystemic epistemology in psychology- assumes that the emphasis is on discovering the communication networks in systems and subsystems and on the transactions that take place in a particular context.

The Development of Ecosystemic Thinking

Newtonian Thinking

Newton held an *ontological view* - there is an objective reality that can be discovered and that the world is therefore understandable, controllable and predictable.

Newtonian thinking rests on the *three basic assumptions:*

1. **Reductionism or atomism-** phenomena or objects can be reduced to their most basic elements as a means of understanding the whole phenomenon or object
2. **Linear causality-** it is accepted that the elements are bound to one another by cause and effect
3. **Objectivity-** the truth can only be discovered if phenomena or objects are observed in an objective way and are not influenced by the observer.

The ecosystemic approach leans especially heavily on constructivism



The Development of Ecosystemic Thinking (cont)

Constructivism- 'reality' is created by the observer, and there can thus be no question of one correct, objective reality.

General System Theory

General System Theory- systems consist of smaller elements or subsystems but, in turn, are also part of larger supra-systems.

Systems form a hierarchy of related systems, and human functioning is studied in terms of the interactional patterns within and between systems

Cybernetics

Cybernetics has to do with the basic principles underlying the control, regulation, exchange and processing of information.

The Development of Ecosystemic Thinking (cont)

First-order cybernetics- emphasises the observation of patterns, and different ways in which events, experiences or phenomena are organised

- The assumption is that the observer can take up a position outside the observed system and describe the interactions objectively.

Second-order cybernetics- proposes a higher-order cybernetics whereby the observer becomes part of the system.

- The recursive connections between systems include the connection between the observer and the observed system

Third-order cybernetics- applies to semiotic systems.

- Semiotic systems are directed at making something meaningful by giving it a name, designation or a signification

Constructivism

The Development of Ecosystemic Thinking (cont)

- People create their 'realities' through the meanings they link to what they observe

A constructivist point of view- there can be no question of one correct, objective truth or reality, and 'reality' is created by the observer, who acts in accordance with his or her 'reality' and looks for corroboration of that 'reality'.

A radical constructivist- who does not acknowledge the two-way or recursive nature of the interaction between the observer and the observed, runs the risk of being described as solipsistic.

- *A solipsist* believes that reality actually exists only in the mind of the observer, and the observation is not influenced by feedback from what is observed



By **ElectroM**

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Not published yet.

Last updated 30th November, 2022.

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The Development of Ecosystemic Thinking (cont)

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism expands constructivist thinking by including the important role that social and cultural contexts play in the way we interpret the world or create meaning.

- The role of social constructions should be recognised in multicultural encounters

- People tend to adhere to these socially constructed belief systems, despite the fact that their personal realities may not fit the socially constructed reality.

The Structure of the Personality

Human Ecosystems

- Psychology came to regard human functioning in terms of larger wholes or systems and the impact of interdependent systems upon another was also highlighted.

The Structure of the Personality (cont)

- The individual is a subsystem within larger systems and having subsystems of its own which all interact

- Although the individual is central in the human ecosystem it is essential to take the context into consideration when examining human behaviour

- Systems are regarded as synergistic. *Synergistic*- the whole is always more than the sum of its parts.

Punctuation

- The differences we perceive make the difference and determine the kinds of relationships or patterns we see.

Punctuation- the activity whereby events or experiences are organised in a particular way.

- The notion of different possible punctuations underlines the existence of different realities

The Structure of the Personality (cont)

'both/and' position- where realities exist side by side, and one reality is not regarded as more valid than another.

The Dynamics of the Personality

The Structure Determination of Systems

The self-determination of systems

- Systems are not directly influenced by independent, external agents.

- The functioning of the system is determined by the organisation and structure of the system itself.

A system- organisationally closed, because a system cannot continue to exist if its organisation is relinquished.

Organisation- what defines the system as a unified entity

The structure- the particular composition and configuration of its components

- The structure of a system therefore determines how it can be used.



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Last updated 30th November, 2022.

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The Dynamics of the Personality (cont)

- Systems cannot be directly influenced from outside, they are regarded as informationally closed they are regarded as *structurally determined*.

- *In living organisms*, organisation remains essentially unchanged, while the structure of the system changes constantly.

- *Perturbation* is used to refer to the fluctuations in a system

The Autonomy Systems

-Because the actions of a system are determined by its structure, systems are autonomous, or self-regulating

The Dynamics of the Personality (cont)

- If a system loses its autonomy and can no longer determine its own actions, it is no longer able to operate as a system

- Systems strive to retain their autonomy.

- A system may even cling to patterns that an observer might regard as a symptom of dysfunction in a desperate attempt to retain its autonomy.

Interactions Within and Between Systems: Stability and Change

- The interactions within and between systems should be seen in terms of patterns that connect, and that interaction takes place through circular feedback loops.

The Dynamics of the Personality (cont)

Feedback loops are apparent in the form of:

1. *Positive feedback*- when feedback gives rise to changes in the system

- Sets in motion changes

2. *Negative feedback*- when feedback brings about no change

- Stabilises the system by minimising any perturbations and keeping the system as stable or unchanged as possible

- The processes of stabilisation and growth cause a dynamic movement in the system, but the two processes balance one another in such a way that a dynamic equilibrium or balance is maintained in the system.



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The Dynamics of the Personality (cont)

Homeostatic principle- The energy within the system is distributed among the parts of the system in such a way that a condition of equilibrium is reached.

General system theory also rests on the principles of equifinality and equipotentiality

1. **Equifinality-** the final position or result is the same or equivalent, although the initial position may be different.

2. **Equipotentiality-** the original position or potential is the same, while different final conditions or effects may be obtained.

The Dynamics of the Personality (cont)

- Different paths may be followed in the process of change, and that a condition of balance can be reached through self-regulating, homeostatic functions.

- Where drastic transformations take place, it is accepted that the boundaries of the system are relatively open, and that influences from within and outside the system affect its existing functioning in an unpredictable way.

Views on Psychopathology

Pathology- is present in a system that reveals a lack of balance and/or complexity.

Views on Psychopathology (cont)

- While there is a balance between stability and change in a healthy system, there is little change in an unhealthy system because of its relative 'closedness', and the system clings to either the status quo or to 'sameness'.

- The entire system is involved in the process of balancing, and that the escalation of an emotion or of a behaviour on the part of one individual can lead to an escalation in the opposite emotion or behaviour in other members of the system.

- **Symptoms** are regarded as metaphors for the relationships in the family. * a symptom says something about the dynamics of the system – it tells the story of the repetitive feedback loops in which the system is trapped



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Optimal Functioning

Ideal or optimal functioning is seen as a relationship between the individual and a system in which the functioning of both is maximised

- **Congruent state of optimal functioning**- a dynamic, complex equilibrium or integration, where one entity, or relationship, or pattern of relationships is not maximised to the detriment of another part of the system, or relationship, or pattern of relationships.

- *Healthy individual* is characterised by complex sets of diverse behaviours and emotions that function in a dynamic equilibrium.

- Healthy development also implies a balance between stability and change. *A healthy system* is relatively open to different experiences that will involve transformation to a higher level of complexity, but it also retains enough 'sameness' to protect the stability of the system.

Implications and Applications

Psychotherapy

Early Therapeutic Orientations

The Structure Orientation General structure theory stimulated an awareness of the prominent role of hierarchical organisation within the family system, and within larger systems

Structural family therapy- if the boundaries of defined hierarchies within a system were destroyed, this would have a detrimental effect on the system.

- *Problems in families arise* when there is a lack of clarity about the boundaries that define structures in the family, and when coalitions and alliances, formed over generations, impair the hierarchies within the family system.

Psychotherapy (cont)

- *A healthy family system* displays a structure that has flexible or adjustable boundaries between the parent subsystem, the child subsystem and the outside world, and in which the hierarchy is not disturbed.

Enmeshed- families with diffuse boundaries

Disengaged- families with rigid boundaries

The boundaries between systems should therefore be **permeable**, but neither too loose nor too rigid

A structural therapist is expected to transcend technique and to give precedence to his or her role as 'healer of people in pain'



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Psychotherapy (cont)

The Strategic Orientation **Strategic family therapists** concentrate mainly on the family as a system, but will often also include members of the wider family and larger social systems.

- Control is an important theme in strategic therapy

- *The therapist functions* from a position of power outside the family, and it is his or her responsibility to plan strategies around the problem in order to solve it. This acknowledges the idea of open systems

The symptom- an analogy for the problem, or a metaphorical representation of it.

- Therapist invents alternative realities and offers or prescribes these to the family, couple or partners. * Team approach is usually adopted in strategic therapy

Psychotherapy (cont)

* One therapist conducts the session, while the rest of the team observes the therapeutic processes from behind a one-way mirror.

The Transition from Early to Later Orientations: The Milan Group

- Follow the **Palo Alto model** of the Mental Research Institute (MRI).

* Used as a basis for researching the communication patterns of schizophrenic family members.

- *Originally* the Milan group focused on identifying homeostatic, repetitive interactional patterns within the family system which, they felt, maintained the 'pathology'

- In their research with families with schizophrenic members, they gave particular attention to the notion of a 'double bind' **Double bind**-the role of conflicting messages in the development of schizophrenic patterns.

Psychotherapy (cont)

A double bind exists when someone is exposed to conflicting messages.

* A person may receive a message to take his or her own spontaneous decisions, but simultaneously receives another message that his or her decisions should be in line with the wishes of others.

* The Milan group would prescribe an intervention which they called a counter paradox, aimed at freeing the family so that it could change

- This intervention consisted of attaching a positive connotation to the behaviour and requesting the family not to change it (the behaviour)

Bateson's theory

emphasises the recursive nature of interactional communication patterns

Codings or transformations-

the rules or 'laws' that connect the ideas and make it possible for the observer to see patterns



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Psychotherapy (cont)

* A family's view of their behaviour, or the meaning they attached to it, was not the same as the patterns of behaviour themselves.

- Instead of focusing on patterns of behaviour, they examined the meanings ascribed to behaviour in a particular context by members of the family, and paid attention to the messages conveyed by the behaviour.

Interviewing methods

Psychotherapy (cont)

Hypothesising- therapists will formulate a hypothesis about family relationships on the basis of the information available, and that this hypothesis will enable them to gather further information in a meaningful way, to test the hypothesis and to propose a new hypothesis on the basis of the additional information.

Circular questioning- a reciprocal pattern of communication between therapist and system, in which the therapist asks a question and listens carefully to the feedback from the system before asking a further question.

Psychotherapy (cont)

Triadic questions- a third person is asked to comment on the relationship between two other people

Neutrality- the neutrality of the therapist's position.

Curiosity- - formulating a hypothesis is essentially a technique, and revised version of these principles: assumes that the therapist knows better than the family, curiosity represents a relationship in which the therapist listens attentively to the family's hypotheses, or rather, the stories the family tells about itself.

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Psychotherapy (cont)

- circular questioning becomes linked with curiosity, the questions the therapist poses are directed at bringing existing meaning structures under the spotlight and considering other 'realities'.

- the role of participant facilitator within an autonomous system

Later Orientations

Based on the principles of second-order cybernetics and constructivism.

- A focus on interactional patterns within and between systems, on complexity and on context, but the therapist now participates actively as an observer of the interactional processes

Psychotherapy (cont)

Therapist includes himself or herself as a co-creator and facilitator in the co-evolution of new, shared realities within the system.

- *Second-order therapy* is an attempt to create a context for change rather than specifically suggesting ways of changing.

- * Shift means that therapists will realise that their *Aesthetic wisdom* knowledge of the interactions within and between systems has to do with a shift in the personal predispositions of the therapist. will always be limited, and that they will never have a big enough picture of the whole to allow them to make accurate predictions

Acknowledges the autonomous nature of systems and that it is grounded upon constructivism.

Psychotherapy (cont)

- The team approach continues to be used in some cases, but now with the aim of generating alternative perspectives through a co-evolution of ideas among team members.

Social constructionism

- People can deny their own personal stories or narratives in favour of so-called 'grand narratives' that reflect the shared beliefs of a particular social or cultural context.

- Therapist is challenged to also listen to the non-dominant stories that clients tell and to use this information in the co-construction of new meanings and the facilitation of change.



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Education

Assumes all the role players in the educational context participate in the co-evolution of the ideas that surround the educational structure and process.

Learning material- the emphasis should lie with larger wholes

The educational relationship - The education process would imply a dialogical conversation between teacher and pupil, and that a consensus would have to be reached through the co-evolution of ideas.

- The process could not be directed towards discovering one truth, but towards detecting connections that enable pupils to move to a more complex level of meaning.

The complexity of the teaching system would have to find a balance and a harmony

- It involves a **'both/and'** approach, not an 'either/or' approach.

Research

The new approaches represent the constructivist thinking we encounter in the ecosystemic approach.

A **positivist framework**, it is accepted that there is a definite reality that the researcher can know. - Reality is then objectively examined from outside, and experimental research methods are used because the observations have to take place under strictly controlled conditions.

Research (cont)

Research is undertaken on the basis of a *'new wave' paradigm* - The assumption of one correct, objective reality is rejected, and it is accepted, instead, that a multitude of realities exist side by side.

- Research is therefore not an attempt to reveal the truth about a reality or to determine whether a particular representation of the reality is true or correct. It is an exploration of different realities.

- The researcher is not regarded as an observer, but as a participant in the interaction processes within the system that is being investigated

- The research process is seen as a *dialectic between experiencing* and explanation or description, where the one feeds back recursively into the other.

Experimental methods are not applied under strictly controlled conditions. - The researcher participates in the co-evolution or the shared construction of ideas within the system under investigation.

Research (cont)

- Interactional patterns are explored, and the consensus is sought on meanings within the system, but this is still regarded as one possible construction of reality.

Such an approach requires a **transparent research process**, in which the researcher reveals the material and how it is organised to the reader. - It is then up to the reader to decide whether the process whereby the researcher has tried to make sense of the information does

Research will be **qualitative**

A limited number of people are usually involved in the research.

The Interpretation and Handling of Aggression

There would be *no attempt*, to suggest universally valid causes of aggression or explanations of it.

Many forms of functioning can, be experienced as aggressive in the family or in the community, and the precise meaning of aggression would therefore have to be explored within the system concerned.

- *In the family*, it would have to be established:
- Who behaves aggressively towards whom;
 - How this behaviour is displayed and in what circumstances;
 - What the effect is on other members of the family; and



The Interpretation and Handling of Aggression (cont)

d. What meaning is assigned to aggression in the family or community.

In the therapeutic context, an unusual meaning is linked with the word 'aggression'.

a. Ecosystemic therapists should not force their views of what is desirable upon a system.

b. They should do no more than participate in the co-evolution of ideas, and present alternative realities.

c. If a therapist should, however, try to insist on his or her ideas, or prescribe them to the system, he or she becomes guilty of aggression, or more specifically, of 'violence'!

Therapeutic violence- the therapist's attempt to instruct the family in his or her own pattern.

Violence- holding an opinion to be true such that another's opinion is untrue and must change.

Evaluation of the Approach

Ecosystemic thinking developed gradually, and that criticism of earlier views does not necessarily apply to later thinking.

Evaluation of the Approach (cont)

There was the phase during which **strategic and structural therapeutic** techniques placed the therapist in a position of such power that critics expressed their concern over this issue.

- Concern was voiced not only with regard to the definition of human functioning as a 'game' but also, and more strongly, with regard to the role of the therapist as the 'master player of games', who had to play games more skilfully than his or her clients.

- Concern about neutrality of the therapist, which led some therapists to work in a cold, distant, uninvolved way.

The central place **currently occupied** in the approach by constructivism does:

1. Allow therapists to enter the therapeutic context with their complete repertoires of human experiences.
2. Bring an atmosphere of warmth, congruence and empathy to the therapeutic context;
3. Give heed to both intellect and affect; and
4. Offer realities from any theoretical perspective as alternative constructions.

Evaluation of the Approach (cont)

This gives the therapist the freedom to participate creatively in the therapeutic process.

Improvisational therapy.

- If the therapist enters into the therapeutic interaction with the client with an open mind, a willingness to listen and take heed of what is said, and show empathy and respect, the therapist will be able to participate freely and generate creative alternative constructions.

Social construction of reality- implies that certain similarities will actually exist between the realities that people construct within the same social context.

Co-constructivism- the view that what we know arises in a relationship between the knower and the known. It takes for granted that a structured reality exists but recognizes that that reality is constructed or mediated in the sense that different aspects are highlighted according to ideas that people individually or in groups have about it.

