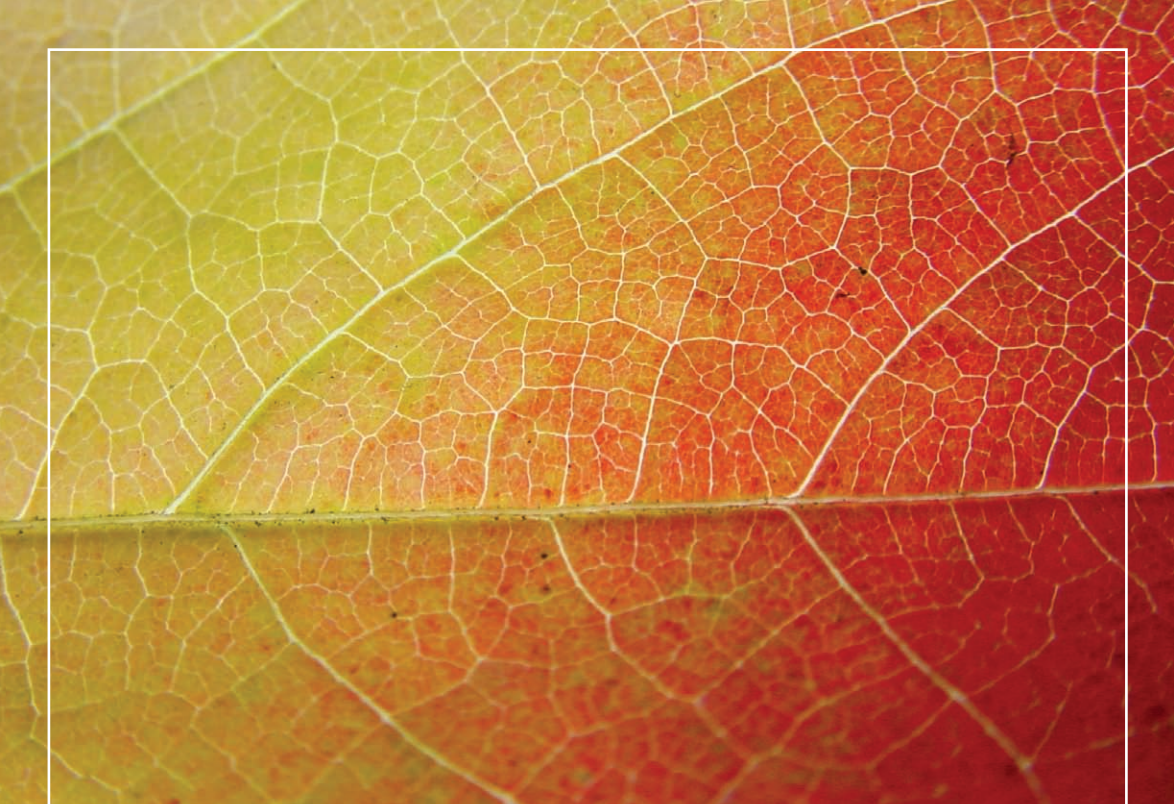

SYSTEMS THEORY IN ACTION

APPLICATIONS TO INDIVIDUAL, COUPLES, AND FAMILY THERAPY

SHELLY SMITH-ACUÑA

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Applications to Individual, Couples, and Family Therapy

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Shelly Smith-Acuña

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To my dad, Warren Smith, for teaching me patience, perseverance, and dedication

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I owe a debt of gratitude to the many systems that supported the writing of this book. I am reminded of the concentric circle diagram that appears in Chapter 2, which outlines all the systems that are influential in the life of a child. In a similar fashion, there are many groups of people who have had a direct or indirect influence on this book.

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Preface

Many of the examples in this book come from the classroom, and I wrote the book with students in mind. I have been fortunate in teaching a Systems Theory in Psychology course for doctoral psychology students for 17 years. This course is required of all first-year students as a part of a year-long theory sequence. Unlike programs that teach systems theory as part of family psychology, our program utilizes systems theory as a foundational model for general mental health practice. Because I have struggled to find sources that use systems theory in this broad way, I began to explore the possibility of writing this book. As I mention in subsequent chapters, beyond the fascinating but dense early texts on applying systemic principles to social groups, there was little available outside the family therapy field. Further, most of the writing done in family therapy was linked to one of the early theorists. I realized that a general systems text could take a step back from these specific approaches and could supplement one of the overview family therapy textbooks.

Many of the other examples in this book come from my clinical practice, and I also wrote the book for practitioners. The art of psychotherapy is a vital, dynamic process that continually keeps me on my toes, and systems theory has been a worthy guide through the process. As my work evolves and improves, I return to basic systemic concepts for insight and clarity. I believe that sharing clinical stories is a meaningful and interesting endeavor that both provides intellectual satisfaction and enriches the work that we do. I hope that the book will allow clinicians to review basic concepts in a way that invites them to reflect on their experiences.

Most students in the mental health field are learning to be clinicians, and most clinicians are lifelong students, so my dual purposes in writing this book overlap considerably. I have tried to translate the technical language of general systems thinking into common, everyday language. As a translator, I endeavor to retain some of the original

excitement of this comprehensive, far-reaching way of looking at human behavior. At the same time, I hope to capture the practical utility of observing human interactions through a systems lens. I have used many of the foundational texts from general systems theory, family therapy, and couples therapy, and I have also included some of my favorite references from the individual therapy literature. I have tried to weave together these background sources in a way that will present you with the key elements of each source and spark your curiosity to go deeper into each theory. Even without going back to the original sources, however, I hope that you will feel solidly grounded in the core components of systemic thinking.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Systems Thinking

I OFTEN BEGIN my course on Systems Theory with a game that has the following directions: ''The name of this game gives the rules of the game. It's called Letters and Patterns, not Words and Concepts.'' I then give some of the following examples and ask the class to join in with their own examples.

It is puppies and kittens, not dogs and cats.
It is summer and fall, not spring and winter.
It is cotton and wool, not silk and nylon.
It is mommy and daddy, not grandma and grandpa.

Generally, at least a few of the students have played the game and chime in with their own examples:

It is beer, pizza, and cheese, but not wine, bread, and chocolate.
It is football and soccer, but not skating and snowboarding.

Then I shake it up a bit and give other types of examples: It is bedroom but not jockey; it is broom but not steak. And finally I will try to make it a bit easier:

It is running, but not run; it is hopping, but not hoping.

At times, a brave student ventures an incorrect guess (''It is swimming but not skiing''; actually, it is both!), but usually students who haven't figured out the game sit with puzzled expressions until I explain the rules. Seeing the words on the page may have helped you uncover the pattern, and most people have an ''aha!'' moment

when the pattern becomes clear to them. The game involves including words that have double letters and excluding words that do not have double letters.

This game is deceptively simple, and participating in the game provides an interesting glimpse into human cognition. While the directions clearly state that words and concepts are not important, students always say that they could not stop themselves from looking for organizing ideas within the list of words. I start the examples by including words that do have some kind of conceptual connection, and most people move right to that level of analysis. The game shows the strengths and the fallacies that come with the way that we organize information.

I also like to start my course with this game because the mental shift that most students experience provides a metaphor for the mental shift that I experienced in learning systems theory. Systems theory has given me comprehensive and far-reaching conceptual insights, and it has helped me correct many erroneous assumptions that are embedded in my thinking or that may be part of our current scientific tradition. While systems thinking has developed from Western scientific traditions, systemic concepts move beyond the type of linear analysis that focuses on isolating and reducing phenomena. This shift is both simple and profound.

As a psychologist, I came to study systems theory through a fairly typical path, by working with couples and families. I initially worked as an elementary school teacher, and in that capacity, I became skilled at applying behavioral theories for classroom management. While there were many elements of teaching that I enjoyed a great deal, I found myself frustrated that I didn't have the ability to help students with more difficult emotional or learning problems. At that point, I pursued graduate work in clinical psychology. I was especially drawn to psychodynamic theories, as they seemed to explain the problems of my former students in a unique and meaningful way, so I replaced my behavioral worldview with an object relations perspective. While I interned at a largely psychoanalytic institution, I was able to do specialty training in a family therapy clinic, and the ''aha!'' moment arrived for me. Rather than making me choose between behavioral or psychodynamic theories, systems theory offered a bridge between these perspectives and examined how they could work together.

In addition to providing a foundation for multiple theoretical perspectives, a systems approach provided an interesting shift in my clinical work. As I was learning systems theory, I vividly remember

beginning to work with a couple on the brink of divorce. The case was perplexing to me in many ways. Both Maureen, 42, and Vincent, 44, were bright, well-educated, and likable people who performed well at work and were devoted to their three children. Neither reported infidelity, substance use, domestic violence, or other dramatic reasons for their marital difficulties. Instead, Maureen reported feeling lonely and unfulfilled in the marriage and was considering asking Vincent to move out of the house. Vincent was baffled by Maureen's discontent and blamed her friends, several of whom were recently divorced. As I explored the problem, I could see individual issues that appeared problematic. Vincent was the high-achieving son of immigrant parents, and his surface bravado seemed to cover deeper insecurities. Maureen seemed to have plunged headlong into the marriage after the death of her mother 20 years earlier, and I thought that this grief was resurfacing as her oldest child was leaving home. But these individual explanations weren't as helpful as I had hoped, and I knew I was missing something.

As I sat in the therapy room with Maureen and Vincent, I began to understand that I needed to examine the development of their relationship, in addition to knowing about them as individuals. In the popular series of *CSI* (*Crime Scene Investigation*) television shows, the camera often surveys the crime scene, sometimes zooming in to notice an important microscopic detail, and sometimes taking a wide-angle approach to examine a pattern at a distance. Invariably, the change in the camera angle and focus reveals important evidence that was easy to miss at first glance. Similar to the way that the *CSI* camera work shows what is beyond the scope of ordinary vision, the systems theory supervision I received gave me the experience of being able to ''see'' Maureen and Vincent's relationship. Suddenly, their marriage became a character in the room, and I understood that the neglect of their relationship had left it feeble and underdeveloped. While I could remain connected to Maureen and Vincent as individuals, I could simultaneously see the richness of the space between them. It was a revelation to understand that their relationship was also my client.

Of course, this revelation did not establish whether they were going to save the relationship or end the relationship. But the focus on their marriage as a system allowed us to explore the balance between their individual needs and the needs of the marriage. I could zoom in and see the important details that each of them felt had been neglected by the other and then zoom back and highlight the ways that these details related to the big picture of their relationship. As the conversation shifted, both were able to identify the ways that they had turned away

from each other, giving attention to work and family without nurturing the marriage. Further, this realization allowed each to invest in the relationship in new and meaningful ways. Maureen included Vincent in family activities in ways that allowed him to feel valued for more than his earning capacity, and Vincent took the time to go to movies and plays with Maureen, something he had previously refused. As they increased their level of involvement, they became warmer and more affectionate, both remembering times early in their relationship when they felt more connected and beginning to dream about what they might enjoy together when their children left home.

I am somewhat embarrassed to say that I was surprised by the changes in Maureen and Vincent's relationship. Thinking about them as individuals, I believed that their marital distress signified something unresolved in each of them. I now know that one of the dangers of emphasizing the problems of an individual is that this emphasis can minimize the healing potential of relationships. A systems perspective showed me that I was missing something crucial in seeing them only as individuals, and the focus on the relationship brought it back to life. Although I have also worked with cases in which the relationship did not revive, I found that the ability to understand individuals in the context of their relationship and to work on relationships as well as on individuals has been invaluable to my clinical work.

The knowledge of systems theory has enriched my work with individuals as well as with couples and families, and it has been useful in a variety of other contexts as well. Colleagues who know that I utilize systems theory often describe themselves in situations like the one I experienced with Maureen and Vincent, feeling that they are missing something and knowing that systems theory could help. When they ask me for resources to brush up on systems theory, I have found myself in a bind. I can generally ask questions about the case and find specific applications of systems theory that will be helpful, but what is missing is a resource that really provides an overview of systemic concepts.

I have four options to offer in terms of systems references at this point, and none of them meets the needs of my colleagues. First, I can recommend one of the original sources in applying systems theory to psychology, and my favorite is the classic by Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). This book is a fascinating source for many basic systems concepts, and it grounds these concepts in mathematical and physical sciences in a sophisticated and elegant manner. Much of the language borrowed from the physical sciences is awkward, however, and can be

difficult to translate into more standard psychological principles. I recommend the book to anyone who has the curiosity and wherewithal to move through it, but it doesn't fit the bill for most clinicians and students. A second option is one of the general systems books that are meant to be useful in a variety of human systems (Hanson, 1995; Laszlo, 1972; Weinberg, 2001). Although these books also review helpful concepts, their applicability to the practice of psychology is limited. A third option is one of the excellent family therapy textbooks on the market, which both review general systems concepts and detail applications from various family therapy traditions (Nichols, 2010; Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). These books do an excellent job of reviewing the history of family therapy and of highlighting its contemporary use, but clinicians who are not involved in family work find their relevance limited. Finally, there is an outstanding book about applying family systems concepts to work with individuals, which uses much of the information that one would find in a family therapy text as a backdrop for working with individuals (Wachtel & Wachtel, 1986). But what is missing in the current literature is a book that addresses the broad themes of systems theory in psychology that utilizes clear, readable language and clinical examples.

The lack of other systems references in psychology quickly triggers one of my pet peeves, the merger of systems theory and family therapy approaches. It is very common for a student to tell me, ''I find systems theory very interesting, but I probably won't use it, since I don't want to work with families.'' Depending on the day, the poor student making this comment may get a long diatribe about the relevance of systems theory to all of psychology, not simply to families. In fairness, it is true that within psychology, much of the application of systems theory comes from the family therapy movement of the 1960s and 1970s, so the confusion is understandable. Yet I find this confusion unfortunate because it limits the use of these concepts and minimizes the relevance of the theory. The use of systems theory as synonymous with family therapy seems especially unnecessary, as systems theory has been applied in business and other disciplines (V. A. Anderson, 1997; Haines, 1998; Senge, 1990). I have come to rely on the basic concepts of systems theory as the foundation of my practice, and I believe that these core concepts have provided consistent, helpful grounding. As current discussions about the integration of psychological services into medical and educational systems have increased, I see that systems concepts could be used as a helpful foundation for many discussions. The timing seems right to revisit a basic knowledge of

systems principles, and it is my hope that this book can provide this type of foundation for work with all types of systems.

WHAT IS SYSTEMS THEORY?

So just what is systems theory? Many of the concepts that we will explore in this book are already familiar and have been described through other philosophical and scientific traditions. In some ways, the term *systems theory* is a misnomer, as there isn't a single definition or tradition that would qualify as a distinct theory. Instead, *systems theory* can be defined as a set of unifying principles about the organization and functioning of systems. *Systems* are defined as meaningful wholes that are maintained by the interaction of their parts (Laszlo, 1972). Using this general definition, systems can include organisms, social groups, and even electronic entities. Most of the concepts that I will discuss can be traced to the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a biologist who was born in Vienna in 1901 (Bertalanffy, 1968; Davidson, 1983). An excellent discussion of Bertalanffy's work can be found in a biography by one of his students, Mark Davidson, who convincingly captures the way that systems theory brought together the cutting-edge trends of the last century. As discussed in the next chapter, Bertalanffy was reacting to the scientific controversies of his time by trying to examine biological phenomena in a holistic, methodical manner. Bertalanffy's 1968 summary work was translated into English as *General System Theory,* yet as the systems theorist Ervin Laszlo (1972) points out, a more accurate translation would be *General Systems Teachings.* Rather than trying to create a new theory, Bertalanffy identified general principles that could be used in a variety of disciplines to move scientific inquiry forward. His hope was to create a type of metaperspective that could allow a common language in multiple areas of study.

In many ways, Bertalanffy's hopes have been realized, as systems principles have been incorporated into a range of scientific paradigms. Parallel to Bertalanffy's work in biology, work by the mathematician Norbert Wiener (1948) also explored systemic ideas, which provided the basis for artificial intelligence. Using the foundational ideas of Bertalanffy and Wiener, the movement to use systems theory to create interdisciplinary study began to grow and develop during and after World War II. This movement culminated in several national conferences and meetings, most notably the Macy's conferences, held between 1946 and 1953 (Heims, 1991). The roster of these conferences