Systemic Thinking in Behaviour Support

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Outline

- Systemic thinking defined
- A systemic approach to behaviour support
- Some helpful systemic tools
What is Systemic Thinking?

“The fundamental assumption on which the systemic thinking concept is based, is that everything is systemic. In other words everything interacts with (affects and is affected by) the things around it. Everything”.

(Bartlett, 2001, p.3)
Analysis + Synthesis = Systemic Thinking

• Analytical thinking enables us to understand the parts of the situation.

• Synthetical thinking enables us to understand how the parts work together.

• Systemic thinking is nothing more than a combination of the two.

(Bartlett, 2001, p.4)
What Is a Systemic Approach?

• A systemic approach assists the clinician in identifying factors that constrain or enable positive change within the family or service system.

• The behaviour of the person is not the problem, as it is a product of interactions within the system.

“The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem”.

(White & Epston, 1990)
What Is a Systemic Approach?

• A systemic approach considers the “presenting problem” (e.g. behaviour of concern) as one exchange in a series of interactions.

• Problems don’t lie within people, but between people.

(Rhodes, 2003)
What Does a Systemic Approach Add to the Behavioural Approach?

- It is concerned with the *homeostatic function* of the behaviour - the role the behaviour play in maintaining the status quo of the system.

- It focuses on facilitating the change of patterns and sequences of interactions between people that have promoted & maintained the behaviour of concern.
Aims of a Systemic Approach

• To assist the clinician/s to construct a new story - a possible *new* way of seeing and relating to the system being explored.

• To assist the clinician/s to generate a range of hypotheses regarding the system which can then be tested through observation, interviews and action with stakeholders.
• To increase the clinicians’ awareness of interactions and relationships within a system and the role these potentially play in maintaining behaviour of concern.

• To assist the clinician/s to examine their own role in the maintenance of interactions and relationships that constrain behavioural change.
When Can a Systemic Approach Be Helpful?

A systemic approach can be useful during the assessment phase of the case, and as part of the intervention phase, when the clinician becomes “stuck” in their attempts to mediate effective change.
Why Is a Systemic Approach Useful in Intellectual Disability?

- There is often a life-long dependency on others.
- Children with intellectual disability often live in complex networks consisting of family, carers, community and professionals.
- Children with intellectual disability seldom initiate their own referrals.
Key Concepts in Systemic Practice

**Relationships:**

- The **structure** of the family/team (e.g., the family/team hierarchy; alliances, coalitions and exclusions, triangulation)
- The **quality and nature** of relationships between various members of the system (closeness and distance)
- Issues of compatibility, hostility and dependence
How Is a Systemic Approach Different?

A *systemic approach requires*:

- Consideration of the temporal context
- Consideration of circular rather than linear explanations of causality
- Self-reflexivity
Interactions

• Sequences

• Patterns

— Investigating the cycle (or ‘dance’) of interactions is enabled by considering patterns and sequences within sample interactions.
Systemic Curiosity and Neutrality

- The practitioner needs to maintain curiosity and neutrality, while recognising the need to address power differences.
  - Reflexivity: capacity to monitor and reflect on own actions and emotions.
Hypothesising

• Asking open questions, rather than providing advice or recommendations regarding change.

• Be wary of becoming attached to any one theme or hypothesis that emerges.

• Open the mind to options rather than close it down to single interpretations.
Systemic Empathy

- Avoid pathologising the family or individual members of the system.

- Focus on understanding rather than explanation.

- Separate actions from intentions.
Self-Reflection

• Self-reflect on your place in the client’s support system as you may inadvertently be contributing to the “stuckness” of the system.

• Possible Topics of Reflection
  – Onset Events
  – Sequences
  – Relationships
  – Exceptions to Systemic Empathy
Circularity

- Beliefs and behaviour are understood as connected in a circular relationship.

- Circularity is more about pattern, interrelationship, and interaction than about cause and effect.

  - Each person is seen as influencing the others in ongoing recursive relationships, so that looking for a starting point or cause of problems is seen as unproductive.

(Fredman, 2006)
Circular Questioning

- Circular questions concern differences about people in their relationships, behaviours, speech, emotions, cognitions, intentions, events, or futures.

  (Tomm, 1988)

- They draw connections and distinctions between family members or people within the larger client system.

  (Brown, 1997)
Circular Questions: Creating Differences

- **Across time:** When...?
- **Between people:** Who...?
- **Between parts of a person:** When you argue with each other, which side is more likely to take over, your *rational* side or your *emotional* side?
- **Between situations:** Do you think his behaviour is better at school or at home?

*(Brown, 1997)*
Circular Questions: Drawing Connections

- **Behaviour**: How do you make sense of the difference between her behaviour at school and at home?
- **Feelings**: When she feels angry, what feelings do you have?
- **Beliefs**: When she doesn’t help around the house, what do you think is going in then?
- **Meaning**: When he is feeling anxious, what do you think his anxiousness is about?
- **Relationship**: When she is angry and expresses that to you, does that make you feel closer or further apart?

*(Brown, 1997)*
• Taking a meta-position
• Remaining respectfully curious
• Asking circular questions
• Maintaining neutrality
• Generating systemic empathy
• Taking care not to pathologise
Some Tools: Genograms and Sociograms

- Mapping of family structure and family history/information
- Mapping of wider support network
- Delineating family relationships
- Delineating relationships within and across support systems and the family system.
Standard Symbols for Genograms

- Male
- Female
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
- Death
- Index person

- Marriage m 1999
- Living together LT 1999
- Divorce m 1999 d 2005

- Biological child
- Foster child
- Adopted child
- Stillbirth
- Twins
- Identical twins
- Pregnancy

- Fused
- Close
- Distant
- Hostile/Conflicting
- Sexual Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Cut-off
- Fused Hostile

(McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellendberge, 1999)
Concentric Diagram of Social Network


