General System Theory

Two central theories that were developed in the early and middle 1900s played critical roles in the emergence of the marriage and family therapy profession. The most widely known is Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s (1968) General System Theory, which argued that a variety of human experiences and social and scientific problems could be thought of as if they were systems. Physicists studying the atom, Bertalanffy noted, realized they couldn’t really understand atomic processes simply by examining smaller and smaller bits of matter in isolation, but must consider the interplay between atomic elements – how they are ordered and organized – not just what they were made of. Social scientists, he said, had likewise moved from thinking of communities and cultures as no more than the sum of the individual citizens who comprised them, and instead had begun to look at how societies as a whole were organized and functioned as more than just a sum of separate human parts. And in the realm of psychology, Bertalanffy held that psychologists in the mid 20th Century had moved beyond poring over isolated mental phenomena – “psychological atoms as it were” (p. 31) – to developing concepts such as gestalt (a German word that basically means “whole”) or “client centered” psychology, which arguably took account of the “wholeness” of personality, not just random feelings or behaviors. “It is necessary,” Bertalanffy wrote, “to study not only parts and processes in isolation, but also to solve the decisive problems found in the organization and order unifying them” (p. 31).
While it is easy to understand how such a concept could (and did) lead from the early practice of treating individuals in therapy one at a time for what were felt to be “individual” problems to the realization that individuals in fact were part of larger systems – couples and families – and thus therapists needed to actually meet together with the members of a “system” – the marital partners, or the children and parents – in order to understand and help them; and while we can also see how Bertalanffy’s ideas suggest that many of the problems individuals encounter in their lives are often not matters of individual pathology, but of the structure of their relationships, one irony of the history of marriage and family therapy is that Bertalanffy himself, despite an intense interest in human behavior and psychotherapy, never talked much about couples or families, let alone families as systems, at all. For him, general system theory was not about seeing individuals as members of larger structures like couples, or thinking of children and parents as elements of a larger dynamic order, but was simply a way to avoid seeing people as mere collections of separate impulses – hunger or thirst or desire – “man as robot” as Bertalanffy put it (p. 205). Instead, general system theory allowed us to view each person as an “active personality system” (p. 207): a living, breathing, loving, hating, working, resting, dreaming, thinking, feeling human being.

Bertalanffy was deeply opposed to the work of behavioral psychologists like B.F. Skinner (1948/1976), whose ideas he thought turned people into “Skinnerian rats,” (Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 206), responding passively to influences as if they lacked any internal values or interests. Bertalanffy instead looked approvingly on the “client-centered” approaches of Carl Rogers, the self-realization work of Abraham Maslow, and the child development work of Jean Piaget. These he saw as dealing with what we might call “the whole person,” rather than isolated
features. He was deeply impacted in his thinking by the slaughter and genocide the world had recently witnessed in World War Two, horrors he saw as partly an outgrowth of demeaning theories of personality and humanness. Beyond the sheer racism of ideas like the Nazis’ “Aryan superman,” who Hitler’s followers believed was a “higher” type of being than Jews or non-whites, Bertalanffy was offended by the notion of people as mere “statistics” or experimental “subjects,” pawns in the grand scheme of power and history, whose lives should be subordinated to the supposed good of either “Science” with a capital S, or the increasingly all powerful “State.” He was similarly opposed to the manipulative uses of psychology for the benefit of social conditioning and thought control, whether for capitalist mass marketers in the United States or totalitarian dictatorships in places like the former Soviet Union. General System Theory – he never used the plural “systems” – was a means to see people as inherently valuable and autonomous rather than mere cogs in a machine, whether they were machines of mass marketing or of political ideologies.

But despite the fact that he himself never talked about couples or families as systems, his sympathy for the concept of personal “wholeness,” and his insight in viewing most human activities and processes as “systems,” laid the groundwork for others to apply his concepts of order and organization to family and couple relationships. To early family therapists, write the scholars Irene and Herbert Goldenberg (2004), “systems concepts became a useful language for conceptualizing a family’s interactive process” (p. 71; italics in original).
Bowen Family Systems Theory

The second theoretical development central to the growth of marriage and family therapy was Murray Bowen’s (1988) vision of how family behaviors were passed down over generations, an idea he called the intergenerational transmission process. Bowen’s argument was that many of the actions we commonly think of as solely under the control of individuals – the choice of whom to marry (or not), of whether or not to have children, and even seemingly non-volitional things like symptoms of depression or anxiety, often had their roots in learned behaviors established by our progenitors. Thus, for example, the widely commented on pattern associated with John F. Kennedy, or his brothers Joe and Robert, of engaging in extra marital affairs (Bly, 1996; Leamer, 1996), is, in transgenerational terms, less a reflection of their own personal failings or even the marriages they were in per se, than their affairs and marriages were reflections of the kinds of relationships and interactions they had learned from their parents, and that their parents had learned from their mothers and fathers before them. Such patterns are maintained, in Bowen’s view, because they serve a variety of practical purposes, and also merge sympathetically with behaviors that have been transmitted to our spouses during their development.

Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson’s (1985) wonderful little Bowenian study, Genograms (a kind of family tree), shows, for example, that, while the Kennedy men’s extra marital involvements made them appear as “cads,” and “cheats,” they also made them look masculine and powerful. And to be wed to such a man, whom beautiful and famous women clearly were attracted to and wanted to be sexually involved with, inevitably enhanced a wife’s
own aura of desirability. He might have an affair with a movie star, but he had married her.

Both husbands and wives, from such a perspective, clearly derived benefits from what otherwise looked simply like “infidelity,” but in reality was far more complex.

The Kennedy women in particular have often been compared with “saints” for their “tolerance” – a status only given to those who willingly live with a “devil” (Leamer, 1996). Further, as McGoldrick and Gerson’s work shows, the pattern of “cheating” husbands and “saintly” wives goes back long before John Kennedy and his brothers were even born, as it was clearly well established in the relationship of their grandparents, Boston Mayor John “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald and his wife Mary, and it was later a central part of the marriage of their parents, Joseph Kennedy, Sr, and his wife Rose, who was “Honey Fitz” and Mary Fitzgerald’s daughter.

Bowen’s central idea was that understanding such factors – how by and large our relationships are shaped by the relationship patterns of our progenitors – can give us sufficient understanding to consciously choose alternative behaviors – thus allowing us to “differentiate” ourselves from our ancestors rather than simply mindlessly following in their footsteps.

Bowen noted that even a conscious effort to simply be the opposite of our parents or grandparents often was merely the other side of the coin of being like them – and frequently was unsuccessful in the long run. A person, for example, who moved away from the area in which most of her relatives lived simply to escape their influence was less choosing a way to be
“different” than acknowledging her inability to establish a truly separate identity from them – she was simply reacting. Bowen called this kind of reaction to aspects of one’s original family (one’s “family of origin”) emotional cut off. A person engaging in emotional cutoff from her family, Bowen argued, was still being controlled by them, because her behavior was simply a reaction against a family pattern – doing the opposite – rather than a rational choice to behave in a truly different way. And of course, to see the validity of Bowen’s idea, we need look no further than the ancient story of Oedipus, who, as had been prophesied at his birth, murdered his father and married his mother while trying to run away from the people he mistakenly thought were his parents in a fruitless effort to avoid his destiny.

It is important to grasp that, unlike Bertalanffy’s General System Theory, which basically said it is useful to think of various processes as “systems,” whether they really are or not, Bowen claimed that all families actually are systems. Thinking of families systemically for Bowen wasn’t just a useful metaphor, as it is for adherents of General System Theory, but a recognition of the true nature of families’ basic structure, even in the animal world. Some of the strongest evidence for the validity of Bowen Family Systems Theory, as it is formally known, in fact can be found in the research of the renowned primatologist, Jane Goodall (1986, 1992), who studied and identified patterns of intergenerational behavior in a large number of chimpanzee families, most famously the family of a chimpanzee she named “Flo,” and whose children and grandchildren she followed for a period of over thirty years, noting intergenerational patterns that governed their development (Lawick, 1991; Johnson, 1996).
Bertalanffy (1968), by contrast, denied that animals really even possessed mental processes, and thus were incapable of emotional experience or mental distress, let alone intergenerational transmission – a view increasingly challenged by more recent zoological research (Masson and McCarthy, 1995). Instead, for him, animals were all instinct. This difference in Bertalanffy and Bowen’s views highlights an underlying and only partly resolved question in family therapy’s theoretical development which is often not fully appreciated – in thinking about families as “systems” are we, like Bertalanffy, simply using a metaphor, or are we talking about the way that families really are?

**Other Theories**

*Psychodynamic theory*

Psychodynamic family therapy in can be seen as a way to use the concepts and symbols of traditional Freudian psychoanalysis as a means to conceptualize roles and patterns in the relationships of couples and families. One of the greatest practitioners of psychodynamic family therapy, and one of the seminal thinkers in marriage and family therapy in general, Nathan Ackerman (1982), writes about a family consisting of a mother and father in their middle forties, a sixteen year old daughter, and the mother’s mother, who have come for therapy because the daughter has shown signs of psychosis – a state of being divorced from reality.

Ackerman describes the family relationship in fairly classic Freudian terms. The bond of the two parents, in his view, is fragile, and when the daughter is born her presence is basically a
threat to the parents’ closeness. The parents therefore subconsciously work to exclude her from
the family, unconsciously seeking to restore their previously unencumbered – meaning childless
– relationship. The grandmother, Ackerman argues, still sees her daughter, the teenager’s
mother, as her child, and the mother often defers to the older female. The father, Ackerman
contends, retreats from conflict with the two adult women. They have come for therapy to “fix”
the daughter, whom the grandmother argues should be sent to boarding school, ostensibly for the
daughter’s benefit, but in keeping with the parents’ subconscious goal of forcing her out of the
household. The daughter, already feeling ignored and abandoned, becomes more symptomatic
at the thought of literally being sent away. “She resisted parental authority, isolated herself in
her room, and threatened violence if they [the adults] invaded her privacy” (p. 407).

From a psychodynamic perspective, the mother in this family, overshadowed by her
mother, has never really matured. The father, because of his fear of confronting either his wife
or his mother in law, was failing to act like a father. This dysfunctional pattern, Ackerman
wrote, was hidden behind the veil of the daughter’s troubling behavior. “The daughter,” in
Ackerman’s view, “came to symbolize the alien and dangerous elements in the family” (p. 429).
She was, in Freudian terms, the unconscious representative of the family’s id, the unreasoning,
instinctual part of human personality, while the mother-grandmother element represented the
superego – the “conscience” of our personalities, which, like all consciences, is often
overbearing and unreasonably harsh in its judgments, unwilling to tolerate imperfection and
ready to expel any member of the system who appeared “out of control.” The father, in this
view, was the ineffectual ego, or self of the system, unable to help the id and superego – the
daughter and the mother-grandmother, learn to live with and accept each other.
Once this perspective on the family was established, treatment became relatively straightforward: helping the mother differentiate from the grandmother and lessening the grandmother’s influence, supporting the father, who, in Ackerman’s view, wanted to be both a good husband and father, but was thwarted by the mother-grandmother alliance, and removing the daughter from her role as holder of all things bad in the family, helping both parents to gradually accept and appreciate her presence as a positive addition to, rather than a detraction from, their household.

Ackerman does not tell us if this approach was successful – presumably it was – but what he does clearly show us is how a Freudian analytic perspective can be used to help understand and attempt to cure the dysfunctions in a troubled family.

*Transgenerational theories*

We have discussed above the best known transgenerational theory, Bowen Family Systems Theory, but it is worth discussing briefly Ivan Borzormenyi-Nagy’s (1984) (usually pronounced just *Nahj*) Contextual Family Therapy.

While there are many aspects to Nagy’s ideas about family relationships, perhaps the most salient was his notion that individuals in families and other close relationships develop internal “ledgers” of “credits” and “debits.” When a family member or spouse takes an action
that she or he believes is good for another family member, she or he develops a sense of having earned a credit. When a member does something that she or he knows may violate a family rule or norm, or comes at the expense of another, the person may feel as if she or he has accrued a debt.

Debts and credits can be passed down through generations, which is the aspect of Nagy’s theory which makes his ideas transgenerational. With the Kennedy family, discussed before, scholars have often argued that the person who really wished to become President of the United States was none of the sons, Joe, Jr., or John Fitzgerald (who did become President), or the younger Bobby, but in reality the father, Joe Kennedy, Sr., though it was widely felt that despite his fortune and political connections – he’d served as Ambassador to England and Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission – his Catholic faith would prevent most Americans from supporting him (Bly, 1996; McGoldrick and Gerson, 1985). The country, it was felt, was not ready for a Catholic head of state (McGoldrick and Gerson, 1985). Thus he prepared his sons to become President in his stead, a pattern sometimes called “delegating” (Stierlin, 1974), in effect making them “indebted” to him for putting them in such a powerful position – and thus obligated to carry out his desire.

In point of fact, three of them arguably felt so indebted they literally died in the course of attempting to fulfill their father’s plan for them: Joe Jr. Was killed in world War Two, John succeeded in becoming President but was assassinated in office, and Bobby was killed taking up his late brothers’ mantle. In taking on this role, they received “credits,” were widely viewed as
heroes and the “good sons,” while their youngest brother Edward, who only reluctantly campaigned after Bobby’s death, was seen as not quite on their level. Bobby’s daughter, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, and eldest son Joseph, have both continued the tradition of political service, she as Lieutenant Governor of Maryland, he as a U.S. Congressional representative.

*Structural theory*

A structural approach to marriage and family therapy, as the name implies, looks for problems in the nominal structure of relationships. This can take any number of forms, but among the more common are the “parentification” of a child or children, or the assumption by a marital or romantic partner of a non-marital or romantic role.

In Woody Allen’s difficult, beautiful film, *Husbands and Wives* (1992), for example, one of the four main characters, Judy, played by Mia Farrow, a woman in her 40s recently separated from her second husband, becomes romantically attracted to a younger man, Michael, whom she continually tries to engage by “mothering” – she brings him lunch and sometimes dinner at his work, makes sure he is comfortable, and even ironically sets him up with another woman, as if she were a mother arranging a date for her son – all in an effort to show him how much she cares for him.
Yet as Allen gently demonstrates by having Judy complain to an unseen interviewer about her first husband, she has set herself up in the wrong role, a role not of a lover, but of a caretaker. Her first husband, she laments was "totally unromantic in every way." He was impotent with her, she says, in the last few years of their marriage (though earlier they conceived a daughter), bought her gifts like coffee makers – at her request, and wanted simply her, she felt, to be his mother. But as a good structural therapist would point out, that seems to be how she actually acts with the men she is involved with, and how she clearly acts with Michael. Thus the lack of romance in her life in many ways seems to be part of a structural pattern she has encouraged, and that the men she has become involved with go along with, a role in which she acts like a mother, rather than a spouse or romantic partner (Johnson, 1993).

Structural family therapy has been particularly helpful in working with families with delinquent children, since often such families show examples of parents who have basically abdicated what structural family therapists call their “executive” role – their duty to make decisions and be in charge of family life. Frequently, such families appear to be run by the children, who make decisions about not only their own lives but other family members – when or whether dinner will be eaten, who comes and goes, even what the parents should do with their time (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981; Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Jr., Rosman, & Schumer, 1967). Treatment thus involves efforts to restore the hierarchy in the family, reestablishing the authority of the parents, and placing the children back into what structural therapists call the sibling subsystem, dependent on and subordinate to the parents – not the other way around (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981; Minuchin, Montalvo, Guerney, Jr., Rosman, & Schumer, 1967).