Expanding Our Thinking About Families as Systems

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Liz works as a psychodramatist, psychologist and family therapist in Melbourne, and is a staff member of the Australian College of Psychodrama. While a systems approach has long been a central part of Morenian thought and practice, the more recent expansion in family therapy offers ideas on how families operate as a system and possible approaches for working with families. This article is based on her conference presentation at Christchurch in 2004.

This paper will introduce you to several concepts that family therapy teaches us about systems in general, and about family structure and dynamics in particular. There are currently at least fourteen schools of family therapy. I will focus on a few aspects that can inform our thinking and perhaps our work as psychodramatists. A glossary of terminology is provided at the end.

The various schools of family therapy emphasise different themes. Some schools of family therapy, including structural, cognitive-behavioural and strategic schools, focus strongly on *problem-maintaining behaviour patterns*. Other schools, including social-constructionist, solution focussed and narrative, particularly address *belief systems and narratives*. Other schools again, including transgenerational, psychoanalytic and multi-systemic, emphasise predisposing *historical, contextual and constitutional factors.* This article touches on all three themes.

The first and perhaps most influential model of how families operate was cybernetics. This is the study of feedback mechanisms in self-regulating systems, such as heating systems. *"At the core of cybernetics is the feedback loop, the process by which a system gets the information necessary to maintain a steady course. This information includes information about its performance relative to the external environment as well as the relationship among the system's parts."* (Nichols and Schwartz, 2001, p.55).

As in other cybernetic systems, in any family there is a tendency to maintain stability, or homeostasis by using information about its performance as feedback. Family therapists who focus on cybernetics regard patterns of communication, known as feedback loops, as the basic source of family dysfunction.

A Family in Therapy

Some key concepts from Family Therapy will become clearer if we focus on a family as it first attends therapy.

The parents, Marguerite and John have requested therapy because they have problems with Mick, who is 14 years old. They also have a daughter, Joanna, aged 18 who *"has never given them a moment's trouble"* and a son, Timmy, aged 12.

Marguerite and John's family is at a particular stage in the developmental life cycle (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989). Perhaps this is the first time they have experienced any rebellion from one of their children. The therapist might hypothesise that this is a time of transition in the family's life. Such times of transition often require new learning, which is navigated with more or less difficulty in every family (ibid).

In addition to the transition to being a parent of adolescents, there are many other times of transition in families, for example the birth of a first baby and retirement. A family therapist who is conscious that there are new challenges at times of transition would be likely to normalise some of Mick's behaviour.

In the first session Marguerite, the mother, sits between her husband and Tim, aged 12. Tim moves his chair close to his mother. Mick sits next to Tim. John, the father, sits between his wife and Joanna, leaving the chair next to Joanna free for the therapist. Joanna glowers at Mick and indicates with a gesture that he should remove his cap. He scowls and ignores her suggestion.

As a result of having the whole family present, the therapist will notice dynamics that may never have emerged if Mick had been seen on his own, or had attended only with his parents. According to systems theory the essential parts of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole which none of the parts have. They arise from the relationships between the parts. These properties are destroyed when the system is reduced to isolated elements (Nichols and Schwartz, 2001). From a systems perspective, then, interviewing Mick on his own is unlikely to be productive.

Many hunches or hypotheses can be arrived at from observing where family members are seated and what they have done as they sit down. Hypotheses need to be held lightly by the therapist so they do not dominate our thinking. *"We don't have to marry any of these hypotheses; we don't even have to date them, we'll just flirt with them for now."* (Boscolo, L in a Workshop at Williams Road Family Therapy Centre, Melbourne, 1983: quoted by Dr Brian Stagoll, personal communication, 1992).
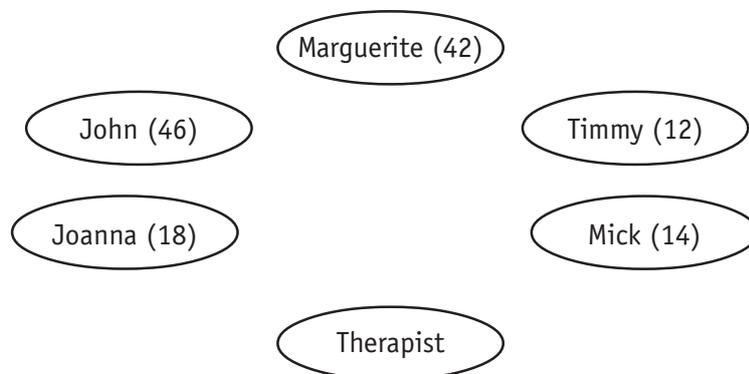

Diagram 1: Seating Arrangement of the Family in the First Session

For example, John has readily agreed to attend the session and is glancing around the family: he seems involved, does not seem to be disengaged. Joanna acts in a disciplinary parental role without comment from her parents: perhaps she is often in this role. Perhaps she is supporting or protecting one or both of her parents. Joanna may be more strongly and positively connected with her parents than Mick. Is she enmeshed with them? Tim wants to sit close to his mother and has moved away from Mick. Is he seeking support, giving it, or both? Perhaps the whole family is in a coalition against Mick. Generating these varied hypotheses enables the therapist to play with or test them out during sessions.

> Marguerite and John describe Mick as increasingly out of control, angry and rebellious. A policeman, who is a family friend, agrees with them that Mick's angry rebelliousness could get him into real trouble. Mick's form teacher recently told them that Mick is defiant, sullen and no longer interested in his school work.

Family systems vary greatly. Some families are open to external systems and influences. Others, for instance families in a highly orthodox religious context, are more closed or impermeable. We already know that this family has been influenced to some degree by the educational system and by their friend the policeman, who is a member of the legal system.

All these descriptions from John, Marguerite, the policeman and the teacher attribute the problem to Mick. Many of his social mirrors provide him with a negative picture of himself. The 'reality' about Mick is socially constructed by many others. It's part of our everyday language or cultural conserve to regard what happens in families as the result of qualities within an individual, such as rebelliousness or anger.

Yet we know from everyday experience that what appears to be the behaviour of one person is in part the product of a relationship. The moment we see a complementary role system this is apparent to us, as psychodramatists. A *"problem is not intrinsic to the protagonist, but is interactional or relational"* (Williams, A 1989, p.28).

A familiar example of a problem often attributed to one person is that of a complaining nagger, who is generally coupled with someone like a persistent ignorer. Family therapists have come up with numerous descriptions of how two people contribute to what arises in the relationship between them: pursuer-distancer, controller-rebel and over functioner-under functioner, to name a few. When such a pattern is recognised, either or both participants can alter their part of the dance. While it's quite easy to see interactional patterns between two people, it's more challenging to see the patterns of interaction, or feedback loops, in whole families. That's where systems theory is useful.

Family Structure
Early family therapists focussed on the structure within families (Minuchin, 1974) and on what structure enables families to function well. Structural family therapy proposes that a family functions most effectively when there is a hierarchy with the parents in charge; when the parents collaborate together; and when the boundaries between the parent and sibling sub-systems are clear. Within the family in our case study, as in any family, there is a parental sub-system and a sibling sub-system. We don't yet know if there are clear boundaries between the parents' and the childrens' sub-systems, though we may have a hunch from Joanna's behaviour with Mick; nor do we know if John and Marguerite parent collaboratively or competitively.

In the first session it emerges that Mick, previously a quiet boy, has been blowing up at his parents' demand that he returns home by midnight. In response Marguerite cries and John has grounded Mick for a fortnight. Mick exploded even more at what he saw as their unreasonableness and his parents continued either crying or attempting to punish him. Mick's 18-year-old sister Joanna, who he describes as bossy and 'a suck', supports her parents' views. She yells at Mick, telling him what to do. Tim is described as very close to his mother and hates to see her cry. He's annoyed with Mick for upsetting their mother.

It's apparent that the intended negative feedback of crying and punishing is escalating rather than decreasing Mick's behaviour. The family has become caught in an escalating feedback loop that is a vicious circle, which might well escalate until Mick runs away from home. *"A change in constructs or patterns - spontaneity - is needed. The task of therapy is to inhibit the repetitive and ineffective use of a current solution in order that new constructs may develop."* (Williams, 1989, p.83). Perhaps the nearest approximation to the Morenian concept of spontaneity is when a family therapist speaks of a new solution or 'news of difference'.

Joanna is in a coalition with her parents against Mick, as if she's an extra parent. Such a cross-generational coalition tends to create or add to problems in any family. A structural family therapist would intervene to alter aspects of the family structure and would address the cross-generational coalition that currently sees Joanna involved as part of the parental sub-system and being enmeshed with her mother.

Circular Descriptions

A linear, reductionist description of the cause of the problem is that Mick's angry behaviour leads to Marguerite crying. However it might be as true to say that Marguerite's tearfulness, whenever Mick disobeys or wants a change to the family's rules, is an ongoing irritation to him. By taking account of both Marguerite's and Mick's perspectives, we arrive at a double description of these dynamics. We might also hypothesise whether John's instantly punitive functioning contributes to Mick's reactivity. Now we have a triple description of the pattern of interaction. If this was concretised and the dynamics were enacted, the triple description would be readily apparent to us.

The feedback loop, or interactional pattern, could be described as starting at any point. Here is one of these descriptions, starting with Marguerite crying. Read it clockwise.
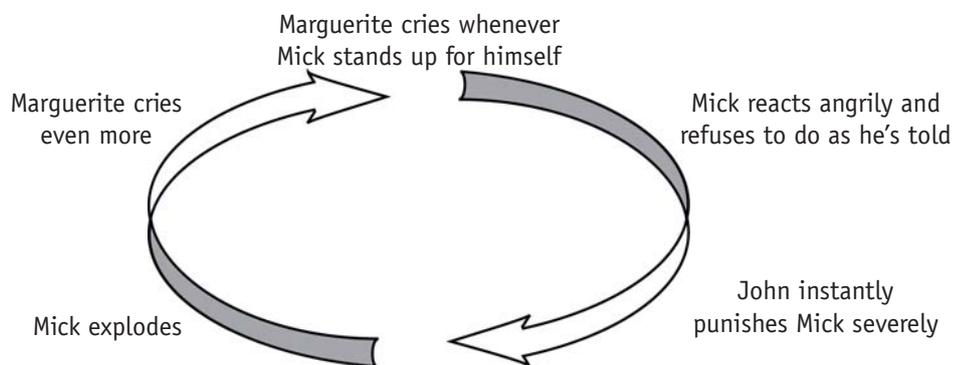

Diagram 1: The Feedback Loop

In this description John, as the third person to be involved in the interaction, can be viewed as triangulating. He appears to be attempting to stabilise the situation. Triangles generally indicate some perceived threat or fear. We can 'flirt' with the possibility that this might well be the case here. We might also begin to hypothisise about what John might be fearful of.

Of course, the vicious circle we've just observed could easily be enacted with either John or Mick as the initial focus, instead of Marguerite. Such circular views of causality provide a broader description of the family's difficulties, enabling therapists to intervene at any point in the cycle. The issue of where the problem started frequently becomes irrelevant when a circular view of causality is taken. A circular view of causality opens up the possibility of investigating new perspectives and hypotheses.

A systems thinker might now consider the question, "What would enable this family to find new ways of interacting when a family member is in pain or angry"? However, while systems theory focuses on interactional patterns, it does not inform us about the unspoken rules and beliefs underlying a family's dynamics.

Unspoken Rules In Families
It's evident that there are unspoken rules and beliefs to do with the expression of pain and anger in this family that are constraining people's functioning. These rules and beliefs need to be taken into account. Some unconscious beliefs and rules will need to change, in order for new perspectives to emerge and lasting change to happen. As we would recognise from any psychodrama, a family's beliefs and rules may be inferred from observation of repeated episodes of interaction and from explicit statements made about what is and what isn't allowed.
We might already have a few hunches about what the family's unspoken beliefs and rules might be. Again, let's just play with these hypotheses, and not 'marry' them.

Marguerite's tearfulness around Mick is not addressed directly. The family seems to be functioning as if there is some pain that must not be discussed. Perhaps there is a fear or myth that if it's discussed the family will fall apart. Maybe there is an unspoken belief that Marguerite is emotionally fragile and must not be upset by Mick. Certainly other family members are acting as if she requires protection from Mick's anger. Perhaps there is a fear that Mick will go off the rails and never get back on.

One tack a family therapist might take would be an investigation of John and Marguerite's families of origin (original social atom). For sure, they learnt much of their parenting there. A focus on John and Marguerite's functioning might lead the therapist to inquire, "Where did you learn to be such concerned, involved parents?" Did you learn some of what you are doing from your Mum or your Dad? What was happening, that made your parents react as they did? And what would you have liked from your parents, when you were Mick's age?

Such family of origin exploration often proves enlightening and fruitful for the whole family, as you would recognise from working with the original social atom of a person. New perspectives on Marguerite's tearfulness, for example, might emerge from this investigation. We might discover that a brother of hers went permanently off the rails in his teens and her parents never recovered. Maybe Marguerite has felt ashamed of her brother and never grieved the loss of him. Perhaps she fears Mick will become lost to her too. This new information could invite some degree of understanding or role reversal with her from other family members.

While many different perspectives and stories are likely to emerge from an exploration of John and Marguerite's families, some narratives may enable the family to see Mick's behaviour in a new and more positive light. For example the therapist might become aware that there is a long tradition in the family of independent young men, eager to take charge of their lives in their early teens. Such a positive view or reframe of Mick's behaviour might overturn the previously dominant and negative narrative about Mick: especially if there is an invitation to look for further evidence that Mick is taking charge of his own life.

Conclusion
In this article I have focused on the context, structure, interactional patterns, rules and beliefs of one family during a time of transition. It's evident that diverse family therapy concepts and approaches can expand our perspectives on how families function and what may be of assistance to them. Some connections with a few psychodramatic concepts and techniques have also emerged.

There are many ways to conceptualize and work with this family. I've introduced you to a few that are drawn from a number of schools of family therapy, and trust that this brief flirtation with family therapy has been of interest to you.

References
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Williams A (1989), *The Passionate Technique. Strategic Psychodrama with Individuals, Families and Groups,* Tavistock/Routledge, London and New York.

Glossary of Terms
Boundaries: The conceptual social border around a family system or subsystem which regulates the flow of information and energy in and out of the system or subsystem. The boundary around the family must be semi-permeable to ensure adaptation and survival. Families that have diffuse boundaries between subsystems are enmeshed and those with rigid boundaries are disengaged.

Circular Causality: The idea that within observed family systems, problem behaviours typically occur within the context of repetitive interactional patterns, in which event A leads to B leads to C leads to A. This is distinguished from linear causality which characterises non-systemic theories and takes the form: event A leads to event B.

Coalition: An alliance, either covert or overt, between two system members. The boundary around such a relationship usually excludes a third system member or subsystem. Difficulties can occur when a coalition is formed across generational boundaries.

Cybernetics: The study of the way biological and mechanical systems use feedback to maintain stability.
Disengagement: Psychological isolation that results from overly rigid boundaries around individuals and subsystems in a family.

Double Description: The process by which the discrepancy between two separate accounts of the same event provides information or news of difference.

Enactment: Inviting a family to engage in problem-maintaining or problem-resolving interactions during the session.

Enmeshment: Loss of autonomy due to a blurring of psychological boundaries.

Enmeshed and Disengaged Families: Enmeshed families are emotionally very close and do not tolerate high levels of individual autonomy. In disengaged families, members are emotionally distant.

Feedback: Within cybernetics: information about change in the system that produces action.

Family Structure. A set of predictable family rules, roles and routines.

Hierarchy: The difference in power between people on either side of a boundary. Parents are commonly hierarchically superior to children within the family structure.

Hierarchical Sructure: Family functioning based on clear generational boundaries, where the parents maintain control and authority.

Homeostasis: The tendency for families to develop recurrent patterns of interaction which helps them to maintain stability, particularly under stress.

Hypothesising: Developing a tentative, systemic mini-theory about some aspect of a system, the validity of which is subsequently checked out through interviewing and observation. Information from interviewing and observation may lead to successive modifications and refinements of hypotheses to improve the degree to which the hypotheses correspond with available information about the system.

Reframing: The positive redescription of behaviour originally described by family members in negative terms. Reframing tends to make the behaviour more amenable to therapeutic change.

System: A complex, rule-governed organisation of interacting parts, the properties of which transcend the sum of the properties of the parts, and which is surrounded by a boundary that regulates the flow of information and energy in and out of the system.

Triangulation: Under stress, dyads involve a third party to form a triangle. Triangulation is a pattern of organisation in which the triangulated individual (usually a child) is required to take sides with one of two other family members (usually the parents).

Pathological Triangle: A common, problem-maintaining pattern of family organisation characterised by a cross-generational coalition between a parent and a child to which the other parent is hierarchically subordinate. The pattern of alliances is covert or denied, and lip service is paid to a strong parental coalition to which the child is hierarchically subordinate.

(Glossary adapted from Carr, 2000, and Nichols & Schwartz, 2001)