



Walter Milowiz, Michaela Judy (ed.)

# STEP

Systemic Social Work Throughout Europe

# Insights



The project „STEP“ has been funded with support from the European Commission.

This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The copyright for the articles belongs to the authors.

Find more informations about this project and a download-version of this handbook on the STEP-website:

**[www.asys.ac.at/step/](http://www.asys.ac.at/step/)**

## Contents

STEP - Systemic Social Work Throughout Europe.....	5
<i>Walter Milowiz &amp; Michaela Judy</i>	
The Principle of Feedback Loops: Forgotten Roots of Systemic Thinking? .....	8
<i>Walter Milowiz</i>	
Developments in the Systemic Ideas of Social Work and Family Therapy.....	18
<i>Katarina Fagrerström &amp; Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski</i>	
At Least Seven Possibilities – Systemic Social Work in Germany.....	30
<i>Johannes Herwig-Lempp</i>	
Systemic Solution-Oriented Social Work in Switzerland.....	41
<i>Käthi Vögtli &amp; Irene Müller</i>	
An Investigation into the Systemic Approach.....	56
<i>Bernhard Lehr</i>	
Hackney - Systemic Approaches to Social Work Practice.....	65
<i>Robert Koglek &amp; Sarah Wright</i>	
Systemic Social Work- a Glimpse from Inside Scotland .....	72
<i>Anke Maas-Lowit &amp; Mike Maas-Lowit</i>	
Introducing Systemic Social Work beyond Europe: How Social Work benefits from the Systemic Perspective.....	80
<i>Lisa Werkmeister Rozas</i>	



## **STEP - Systemic Social Work Throughout Europe**

### ***A Handbook for Practitioners about Steps We Took, Work We Did and Insights We Gained***

In October 2010 seven teams from seven institutions in five European countries working in the field of social work on a systemic basis met in Vienna: teachers, practitioners and researchers. What they had in common was a name for their working field and their theoretical approach: social work on a systemic basis.

They decided to start a discussion about the theory and how it could be applied in social work. For this aim they applied for an EU-Leonardo-da-Vinci-Partnership project and met another six times in each of their countries, held lectures, showed each other social projects, discussed with more practitioners, students and teachers.

It was not an easy endeavour: In the beginning we could nearly only see differences, as every partner put his/her emphasis on the way he/she worked. But the systemic approach is a big tree with many roots and many branches.

By and by we learned to follow down the branches and up the trunk and in the end - after lots of patience and hard work we could see that there are basic commons and the differences are different possibilities of application. You will find some more about the importance of different possibilities in Johannes Herwig-Lempp's Article „At Least Seven Possibilities - Systemic Social Work in Germany“.

The commons are:

- Whatever happens is always part of the interactions of a bigger system - from family up to politics
- Complex feedback-loops define stability of systems - no matter whether they are fine or bad
- Humans as autopoietic systems produce their own reality
- It is not possible to look into humans nor to control their behaviour
- Most of the unfavourable but stable systems build up on the difficulty that people with different views of the world fail to understand each other.
- Every change in one point of a system causes further changes in the bigger system.

One reason for our seemingly disagreements and misunderstandings in the beginning was, that every one of us spoke about his/her work and his/her ideas concerning his/her work and not about the basics: About the branches and not about the roots.

After we realized the common roots we could see the different ways people work as different ways to actualize the fundamental systemic paradigm in the main aim of social work. Social work is concerned with people living under conditions not complying with the standards of the society or are in danger of not doing so in the future. Its business is to help such people to stabilize their lives.

Each article of this book illustrates one or more of the basic principles of the systemic approach and shows exemplarily typical ways of actualizing them in the working field of social work.

They also illustrate the way every institution - as an example for their respective countries - has taken in developing practise from the basic ideas.

When you read this book you will first find the theory of feedback loops and their relevance in the article of Walter Milowiz: "The principle of feedback loops: Forgotten roots of systemic thinking?", also a few examples of how to use this idea as an instrument for diagnosis and intervention in problematic situations.

Synnoeve Karvinen-Niirikoski's and Katarina Fagerström's paper „ Developments in the systemic ideas of social work and family therapy in Finland" gives an overview at the epistemological history of the concept "systemic" in a social work and family therapy context and links it to contemporary social work in Finland. Finally it presents some examples of practices that can be considered as systemic social work, the challenges of which they identify as calling reflexive and flexible practitioners conscious of their own agency and expertise affecting their attitudes, services and interventions they provide. They also describe methods of training for practitioners.

Johannes Herwig-Lempp shows in his article "At Least Seven Possibilities - Systemic Social Work in Germany" how the systemic approach was received and developed in Germany.

Based on the constructivist paradigm the Merseburg concept focusses on change i.e. that change is a constant, that we can only move ahead, not back, and that small changes lead to further changes. His image of human personality consequently refers to "Eigensinn" (autonomy, self-will) and to a systemic view that focusses on resources, contexts and mandates, perspectives, autonomy and appreciation.

Käthi Vöggtli and Irene Müller describe in "Systemic Solution-Oriented Social Work in Switzerland" the development of teaching solution focussed Social Work at FH Luzern according to the development of solution focussed and systemic approaches. They are grounded in the conviction that clients are experts on their own life, on dialogue and on the expertise of not-knowing. Examples of a systemic approach in practice round off the article.

Bernhard Lehr (FH Campus Wien) builds his article on considerations about the idea of insight. He joins the principles of feedback-loops, 2<sup>nd</sup> order cybernetics and constructivism and shows a method for training and supervising, which he deduces from those.

The article from London is an example for the application of the systemic approach to the wider system: „Hackney - systemic approaches to social work practice" by Robert Koglek and Sarah Wright describes the introduction and development of systemic approaches to social work practice within a statutory Children's Social Care department in the London Borough of Hackney. The Hackney Model of social work brings together social workers and clinical practitioners from a range of disciplines and backgrounds to work collectively and collaboratively with families, introducing multiple perspectives and providing professional support to each other in managing high risk situations. The main aim - to enable more children to live safely within their families - can be achieved by that.

The contribution from Aberdeen, too, shows the connections between the situation of the individual, its surrounding and the social system: Anke Maas-Lowit and Michael Maas-Lowit discuss in their article „Systemic social work- a glimpse from inside Scotland" systemic social work within the scotish social system for people who have committed serious criminal offences and who also experience mental illness. It outlines the systemic relationship between both social worker and the offender and wider systems of law.

And last but not least one of the Merseburg participants fortunately is also a teacher for social work in Connecticut, USA thus introducing a wider international perspective. In her article "Introducing Systemic Social Work beyond Europe: How Social Work benefits from the Systemic Perspective" Lisa Werkmeister Rozas focusses on the applicability of systemic approaches to social work, especially on how the U.S. education of social workers could benefit: „One aspect of Systemic social work which makes it very well suited for social work is that it is taught with a focus on applicability. Theory and practice are woven together in a manner that makes the methods very accessible, practical, and easy to utilize and understand.”

## The Principle of Feedback Loops: Forgotten Roots of Systemic Thinking?

Walter Milowiz

### **Abstract**

*Three case studies we will show that the term “feedback”, as adapted also for social systems by cyberneticists in the middle of the 20th century, which came quite out of fashion in the last years, is a extraordinarily good instrument for diagnosis and for developing strategies of intervention in problematic social situations. We will explain the term again and show the way we use it in the Vienna School of Systemic Social Work.*

---

*Anhand dreier Fallbeispiele wird gezeigt, dass der von den Kybernetikern Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts auch für soziale Systeme adaptierte Begriff „Rückkoppelung“, der inzwischen weitgehend aus den theoretischen Diskursen verschwunden ist, ein hervorragendes Instrument zur Diagnose und zur Entwicklung von Interventionsstrategien in sozialen Problemsituationen ist. Der Begriff wird neu erläutert und seine Verwendung in der Wiener Schule der Systemischen Sozialarbeit deutlich gemacht.*

### **Introduction**

In Austria only ASYS (Association for Systemic Social Work, Counseling and Supervision) offers systemic postgraduate courses in systemic social work. Although there is quite a number of social workers having passed a systemic education after their studies, this is mostly an education in family therapy. Our postgraduate courses in systemic social work started in 1990 at the Federal College for Social Work in Vienna. In 1996 ASYS was founded, because the alumni lacked a surrounding where they could keep up with systemic thinking and stay in touch with colleagues. 1998 the first edition of "Teufelskreis und Lebensweg" by Walter Milowiz was published, which helped the ASYS community to develop more and more into a "Viennese school of systemic social work", which is also taught at the university of applied science FH-campus Vienna by Bernhard Lehr, one of our members<sup>1</sup>.

Systemic approaches are influenced by different schools of thought. They are referring to Luhmann, Selvini-Palazzoli, Watzlawick, M. H. Erickson, narrative and solution-focussed approaches.

The range of systemic workshops and courses is as wide as systemic and systems theory.

ASYS represents a more or less classical systemic point of view, founded on Bateson's and Watzlawick's theory of communication, Maturana's idea of autopoiesis and von Foerster's "2<sup>nd</sup> order Cybernetics".

---

<sup>1</sup> See his article in this book

The main goal in our education is to impart to our students a systemic epistemology and a systemic attitude. We try to help them looking at the world and their clients in a systemic way, which means developing a deeper understanding of circularity and the ability to control their interventions from this point of view.

As our thinking is referring to a theory of cognition it is completely open to every technique and method – may this be e.g. psychoanalytic, group-dynamic or solution-focussed. It's the attitude, not the method that makes an intervention, a behaviour "systemic".

Some examples and their theoretical explanation may help understanding this approach.

### ***Case study 1<sup>2</sup>: Tutelage***

Irene K, 19 years old, left her parent's home at the age of 16. At first, she lived on the streets alone, later on with a petty dealer and also took drugs herself. When she got pregnant from him, she separated from him, stopped taking drugs and looked for and found shelter with an NGO for sheltered living. There, she had to prove her ability to live independently in order to be granted a council flat later on. To that end, she had to meet up with her counselor regularly to prove her reliability, which turned out to be difficult:

She rarely kept appointments and behaved in a dismissive way towards her counselor. Her counselor found her to be very difficult, and not only doubted her ability to live independently but also thought Irene should give up the baby for adoption as she wouldn't be able to take on that sort of responsibility. Their relationship deteriorated and the question arose whether Irene could be kept among the NGO's clients and whether she could really be assigned a council flat. Because of the unborn child, youth welfare services were contacted.

The intern who reported the case in a workshop did not work there anymore. A few months later she told us that she had met a colleague from that NGO, who said that everything has changed entirely regarding Irene: she has thrived, would be moving into her council flat soon and was thought to have everything under control.

Coincidentally, because her first counselor left for maternity leave herself, Irene was assigned another counselor. This new counselor was impressed upon reading Irene's case description that this young woman broke away from drugs, her boyfriend and the street all by herself and obviously had not relapsed, and told Irene so during their first meeting. From there on, there have been no more difficulties with Irene.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lehr, Milowiz: 2009

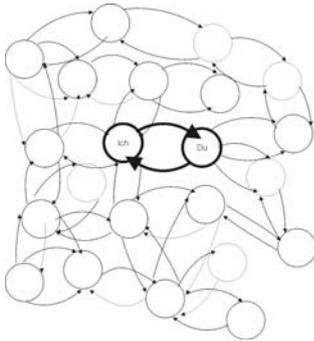


Figure 1: The fundamental feedback loop

Analysis in the workshop resulted in the conclusion that, probably, Irene was entangled in a similar interactional pattern with her first counselor as with her parents at the time of leaving home, and that change could only occur when a person in relationship with her could acknowledge her achievements.

Our „diagnostic“ approach in the **Vienna School of Systemic Social Work** aims at interpreting **behaviour** resulting in critical case courses as **feedback loops of negative reactions**:

If the daughter tries

- to withdraw and
- if the parents react with criticism,
- if the daughter then tries to withdraw from this criticism
- and if the parents react with criticism again,

then, in this case, such a feedback loop has emerged. This loop can be seen as a script in which behaviour has become predictable because it mutually conditions and causes each other.

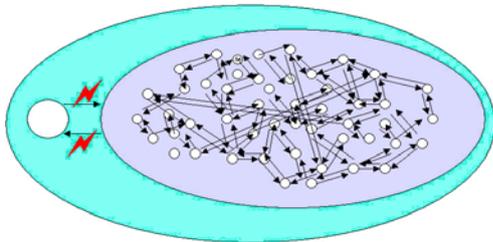


Figure 2: Outsider and society

If this pattern is recognized and if these mutual defensive attitudes can be found, one can deduct what can be done from the social workers' side to achieve change. Social workers' behaviour or that of the social environment of the indicated client respectively is here seen as co-constitutive part of the problem: Neither the daughter's behaviour is independent and unfluencable nor that of the parents, but both are a reaction to the other.

This is an example of a fundamental feedback loop.

In a simplified way, and explained along a relationship of two persons: each action of person A has an effect on person B – and on his/her actions. These, in turn, retroact on person A and his/her actions. Via the detour of the environment each action reacts upon itself.

And this repercussion we call feedback.

It can amplify interaction, which we call positive feedback, or attenuate interaction, which we call negative feedback. **This principle of interdependence is the most fundamental basis of today's systemic thinking, and only on the basis of the principle of feedback are we able to understand and describe autopoiesis and circularity.**

We owe the principle of feedback to cybernetics: In the 40s of the past century, William Ross Ashby (cf. Ashby:1957) built some small mechanical machines that were linked in a way that each change on one machine influenced all other machines as well. And behold, after some time of unordered change, the combination of machines started to achieve a state of equilibrium, and reacted to influences from the outside in a way to regain this equilibrium. Deviations were encountered in a neutralizing way. This procedure he called ‚negative feedback‘. In the same way, he named another procedure, which could also happen, positive feedback: when a change in the system led the system to deviate more and more from its equilibrium – which, unchecked, would certainly lead to some form of catastrophe.

The mental research institute's team in Palo Alto, whose most famous author was Paul Watzlawick, illustrated it in the way we still do: In a circle, in which two or more ways of behaviour mutually cause each other; either amplifying or attenuating (cf. Watzlawick: 1967). They deduced a perspective which assumes that disorders in human coexistence are always homostatic or escalating self-preserving cycles of interaction which consist of the participants wanting to change something in the interaction.

The earliest therapies deduced from this principle were the so called paradoxical interventions which aimed at rendering the attempt of change absurd by adding a mandate, thereby achieving a breakdown of the paradoxical fight for change.

You can find many examples for such interventions in Watzlawick's ‚Human Communication: 1967‘ and a second book, ‚Solutions: 1974, in Selvini-Palazzoli's ‚Paradoxon und Antiparadoxon: 1977‘ and also in Thomas and Gabriele Weiss' book ‚Familientherapie ohne Familie: 1993‘.

For interactional systems, Watzlawick's proposition is valid that non-communication is not possible, and furthermore, that they consist of mutually circular causal actions:

Each action has an impact on its environment and therefore on actions in this environment. And these actions again retroact on the person who has started the original action, and that person's further actions. And hence we have come full circle, which in simpler cases is called feedback and in more complex cases is called circularity.

Now we only have to understand how self-preserving or even self-amplifying developments emerge.

This can be illustrated with the help of the example above:

- If Irene struggles against tutelage by withdrawing herself; and
- if her parents and later on the social worker of the NGO ‚Sheltered Living‘ interpret her attempts of withdrawal as lack of responsibility and want to spoon-feed her even more,

then, this results in an escalating system of mutually escalating actions. And the non-predictability of systems reactions recedes into the background, because some form of ‚sense‘ has emerged and the

participants of this communication will react in the same or similar ways to the same or similar actions. This is the manner in which such structures become relatively predictable.

It is important, however, to remain aware that this is not a form of static suchness, but a form of self-reproduction, that means that a seemingly stable situation is constantly reenacted through a specific interaction among the participants.

We call **relationships that consist of a constant fight of all participants for change of the relationship dysfunctional relationships or vicious circles.**

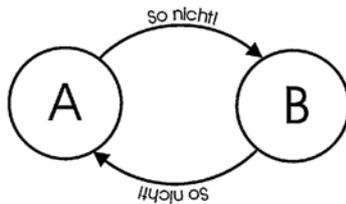


Figure 3: The problem cycle

And, naturally, all actions seen as part of this circle cannot lead to change.

To understand circularity in social interactions, you have to disengage yourself from the conventional way of thinking, in which communication is only seen as „intended message“. Circularity can only be understood if one abides by the early communications theoreticians as Watzlawick or Bateson (cf.1985), and includes everything into examination that exists between humans altogether.

If a person loses his/her job, this is a message to him/her on the part of the employer, if someone receives the breadline, this is a message on the part of politics, and can also be seen as a message from society:

From now on, we only help you via taxes.

We let politicians decide what you should be able to afford, and, especially, what you shouldn't.

(I would interpret the fact, that someone who wants to help privately has very little legal room to do so in a way that society in its politically elected whole or majority thinks that we should not give away a bigger share of our taxes. If someone receives something in private, s/he shouldn't get it additionally through the breadline.)

If someone loses his/her flat, this is a message from his/her surroundings that s/he is not granted shelter anymore under the given circumstances: The behaviour of the affected person plays a major role, and additionally, as message to person(s) who have a flat to let: Factors like what a flat looks like, smells like and sounds, also belong to a person's behaviour. And whether someone pays rent or not is also counted among a person's communication.

For the sake of comprehensiveness I would like to point out that all of our functioning interaction in society also consists of – often complex – circular loops, for example, the baker bakes bread because it is bought and bread is bought because he bakes it, the same way as other societal functions are carried out as long as there are reactions that effectuate them.

These circular loops are often very complex and cannot be perceived in every detail, but if somewhere things are escalating, the central participants are made salient through the intensity of the reciprocal action.

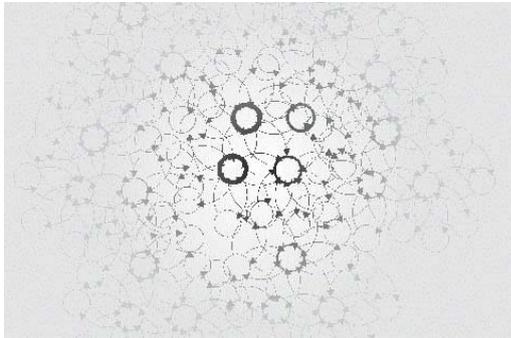


Figure 4: Escalating systems in society are salient

### ***Case study 2: The stronger one has his say<sup>3</sup>***

In my role as supervisor, I once got trapped in a remarkable case concerning meta communication: The son of an Albanian family was doing poorly at school. The teacher asked the parents to come, and when they did the father threatened to burn the teacher's house if he caused their son further trouble. The director, who contacted the parents next, was also threatened. The case was brought to the attention of the local school authority, who asked for police protection when the father threatened to torch the building of that authority.

And here was the trap: in a supervision group, we tried to find a solution together how we could pay the gentleman from Albania sufficient respect so that we could deal with him cooperatively.

But the story took a different course: the police got annoyed with the man because of whom they had to protect a large building, and arrested him for a few days due to dangerous threats. From that moment on, the Albanian was the most cooperative man the responsible social worker had ever seen, and did everything that was suggested in order to help his son.

I hope no one believes that the man had been malicious! I rather tend to think that in his home culture it was customary that the stronger one has his say, and therefore it was necessary to find out who was the stronger one.

#### **Theses:**

A priori:

This is not the true description of reality. Each description of reality has its justification as long as it delights somebody. I find mine quite practical when dealing with social phenomena of every kind. But I also think that it can describe each perceivable phenomenon altogether. It is logical and consistent and can depict each and every conceivable circumstance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Milowiz: 2005

The theses:

1. **Whatever exists** in the world, does not exist due to some (historical) cause but foremost because it **reproduces itself constantly in the course of a reciprocal action with its environment**. This means that there are no things that were created at some point and continue their existence without self-reproduction. However, there are things, that only emerge in the course of a reciprocal action and keep existing in one. Each phenomenon in the world can be described in the scope of such a reciprocal action.
2. **One can divide the world into arbitrary entities in order to study such reciprocal actions:** one can examine the reciprocal action between two humans (one has to factor in the reciprocal action of this subsystem with the world, however), the reciprocal action of one human with the rest of the world, the reciprocal action between humans and organisations, in short, everything where effects can be exchanged.
3. Basically, all parts of the world have to be factored in and have to be reflected in regard with the question which more or less relevant role they play through their doing or their non-doing in the course of a reciprocal action. Also **the effect of the observer, describer, reflector or analysor of a reciprocal action on the examined reciprocal action needs to be taken into account**.
4. **Reciprocal actions** do not happen due to intentions of the conscious and the unconscious kind, also not due to emotions or the like, but due to the exchange of effects (Showing emotions can trigger an effect). **They do not prerequisite thinking or consciousness of the participating elements** (i.e., an unconscious person lying on the street will in most cases have an effect and thereby become part of a reciprocal action).
5. The attempt at eliminating an issue (by whoever – including myself) can either cause the issue to dissappear or to continue its existence. **If something shall be eliminated and still continues to exist, one should reckon that by the very attempt at elimination one contributes to its existence**. This means, among other things, that one can assume that things that have been in existence for a while, will defend themselves against attempts at eliminating them. This means that rejection or the attempt at elimination is usually not causing change (except if one uses more forceful measures than have been tried previously).
6. Because the world exists due to reciprocal actions and because I am one of the participants, this results in the fact that **the only way I can achieve change is by showing a changed behaviour**. Changes in others can only be caused by the effects of my behaviour.
7. As we cannot recognise the mechanisms of the participating elements, but only the self-preserving reciprocal actions, it is basically not possible to predict anything more than repetition, escalation, or change. **The direction of change is basically not predictable**, i.e., what changes in which way due to a change in ourselves is not predictable. This means, we might be able to break a vicious circle but we cannot govern which new reciprocal actions will emerge.

The fact that one can deduct a highly effective diagnostic instrument for social relationships from the principle of feedback, but no all-time valid procedures how a counselor should behave when encountering a specific social phenomenon, might be one reason why this way of perceiving things has not become common knowledge in social work.

DeShazer's and Berg's (1998) solution-oriented approach can be deducted from this principle, but has proclaimed the solution-orientation its absolute maxim, so that it is more easily implemented as a rule of conduct. Solution-orientation really only is a method that is useful in many cases (in those in which participants of the problem think and perceive in a problem-oriented way), but not in others. One can get stuck as easily using a solution-oriented approach as when using another method, and in that case the proposition formulated by DeShazer himself comes into force: If something does not work, do something different!

In cases like the one above, the game will be continued as long as someone does something the father can understand as weakness: this is the very motivation for him to continue his fight. He will most likely not view positive connotation and miracle questions relevant for clarifying the relationship.

**Looking at the reciprocal feedback loop can help us to perceive which parts the „problem“game consists of, but from there on, not a recipe, but rather creativity is needed. And this does not consist of following a set of rules. It does not exclude them, but if it is narrowed down to them, it will fail.**

Another reason for the fact that circular thinking has not really been accepted widely in social work is the fact that, normally, social workers work in the mandate of an institution that has certain ideas about how their clients should behave after having received assistance. If, at maximum, we can manage to break vicious circles, it is outside our control to promise exact results of our interventions. Circular thinking makes this fact very plain.

### ***Case study 3: Paying a contribution***

Recently, we talked about a situation at the social academy in which a woman from Serbia, who was sent by the family authorities with her children to a free, supervised family vacation on a farm and who constantly wanted to contribute something: pay something, take on work, etc. The counselors, however, wanted her to spend some leisure time with her children. The poor woman became more and more nervous and more and more insecure, and later on also aggressive, until she finally completely withdrew. The only action she continued until the end of her vacation was to try to force money on her hosts.

I think many social workers know this tricky situation when people who have received some financial assistance because of their catastrophic situation - and often people with a migrational background - when these people want to present us with relatively expensive gifts. I am not sure whether in this instance it is about showing gratitude or about keeping the sham of equality, or whether it is a way of humouring someone who might be useful later on - maybe it is a little bit of everything - but the fact that something relevant is at work here is also shown by the fact that it is practically impossible not to accept these gifts.

In the past few years, I have become very sensitive towards the question how a certain behaviour can mean different things to different people, and that humans who cannot understand each other due to this, often end up in a vicious circle.

Cultural differences definitely play a role. But there are also differences in the cultures of family A. and family B., in which, from a sociological viewpoint, one would not concede the smallest cultural difference. Who knows, for example, that in family X., one uses the phrase, "Such nonsense!" when one does not understand, and that in this family, it is customary to react to this phrase by explaining in more detail? I, for myself, tend to react rather aggressively in such a case.

In the Vienna School of Systemic Social Work, we always consider this self-reproduction of problematic situations when working systemically: if something exists for a longer time span, there must be a mechanism of how it preserves itself.

And therefore we understand our interventions in a way that they bring movement into gridlocked interactional patterns and thereby make change possible. We do this by bringing something into the system, something new that has not been there before. This new something has to be invented in each situation, there can be no rules about it, and this makes the application of this model of thought, though so simple, oftentimes difficult.

We also assume that people, as soon as they can move more freely again, find new and more productive ways of living together. This is the second difficult moment: to have faith that something meaningful happens although we cannot direct it.

And last but not least: introducing something new often means acting unconventionally. This is sometimes difficult to advocate: in front of oneself, one's colleagues, one's employers and the world. But if possible, it is worth it.

## **References**

Ashby William Ross (1957): An Introduction to Cybernetics. London

Bateson Gregory (1972): Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology. Chicago

Foerster Heinz von (1995): Cybernetics of Cybernetics, The Control of Control and the Communication of Communication. Minneapolis

Ivancsits Edith (2000): Die Absolution der Flüchtigen. In: BASYS – Berichte des Arbeitskreises für Systemische Sozialarbeit, Beratung und Supervision. Serial Number 9, Issue 2/2000

Jong Peter de, Berg Insoo Kim (1998): Interviewing for Solutions. Pacific Grove

Lehr Bernhard, Milowiz Walter (2009): Die Rückkoppelungsschleife als Diagnoseinstrument: Erfassung der autopoietischen Selbsterhaltung von Problemsystemen. In: Pantucek Peter, Röh, Dieter (Hg.): Perspektiven Sozialer Diagnostik. Über den Stand der Entwicklung von Verfahren und Standards. Münster, Hamburg, London, p. 135 - 146

Maturana Humberto R. (1992): Tree of Knowledge: Biological Roots of Human Understanding. Boston

Milowiz Walter (2005): Das Fremde ist immer und überall. In: Hartmann Gabriella, Judy Michaela (Hg.): Unterschiede machen. Managing Gender & Diversity in Organisationen und Gesellschaft. Wien, p. 153 - 166

Selvini-Palazzoli Mara, Boscolo Luigi, Cecchin Gianfranco, Prata Giuliana (1977) Paradoxon und Gegenparadoxon, Stuttgart

Watzlawick Paul, Beavin Janet H., Jackson Don D. (1967): Pragmatics of Human Communication. A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies an Paradoxes. New York

Watzlawick Paul, Weakland John H., Fisch Richard (1974): Change. Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution. New York

Weiss Thomas, Haertel-Weiss Gabriele (1993): Familientherapie ohne Familie. Kurztherapie mit Einzelpatienten. München

## Developments in the Systemic Ideas of Social Work and Family Therapy

Katarina Fagerström & Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski, University of Helsinki

### **Abstract**

*In this article the intention is first to look at some developments of “systemic” in a social work and family therapy context in Finland. Secondly we give some examples promoting dialogic and systemic ideas in social work practices by the models developed in Finland by the researchers and teachers participating the Step –project. The developments in systemic thinking have their roots in the 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific efforts in explaining world and human agency. Social work and family therapy share their basic interest in working with people in a person-to-person relationship in their complex living contexts both aiming in positive transformation.*

---

*Dieser Artikel betrachtet vorerst einige Entwicklungen des "Systemischen" im Kontext von Sozialarbeit und Familientherapie in Finnland. Weiterhin geben wir einige Beispiele dafür, wie dialogische und systemische Ideen durch Modelle von Lehrenden und Forscherinnen, die auch am STEP-Projekt teilgenommen haben, in der Praxis der Sozialarbeit implementiert werden. Die Entwicklungen systemischen Denkens wurzeln im wissenschaftlichen Anspruch des 20. Jahrhunderts, die Welt und menschliche Interaktion gleichermaßen zu verstehen. Sozialarbeit und Familientherapie teilen dieses fundamentale Interesse, mit Menschen sowohl in einer dualen Beziehung wie auch in deren komplexen Lebenszusammenhängen mit dem Ziel positiver Veränderung zu arbeiten.*

### **Introduction**

It was not until the mid 20th century that classical systems thinking was articulated as formal theory. Among the most renowned classical systems theorists were Parsons (1951), Luhmann (1984) and then von Bertalanffy (1968) - all suggesting that systems, their elements, and interactions could be ascertained and represented. Talcott Parson was a functionalist and viewed systems through that lens. By functionalism, Parsons (1951) meant that the descriptive behavior of small and large social groups could be explained by the human drive to meet four functional tasks: 1) Adaption to the physical and social environment 2) Goal attainment 3) Development of an integrated and sound society 4) Creating the expectancy and incentives for individuals within social systems to carry out their functions. (DePoy& Gilson 2012, 226). Bertalanffy was a central figure in grounding the understanding of dynamics of cybernetic systems, the homeostasis as central concept. Niklas Luhmann (1984) presented systemic view on the complexities of social systems and has lately been a central theorist even for social conceptualizations of systemic approaches to day (Kilpeläinen 2009). Gregory Bateson (1972) with his interest on patterns of communication, behavior and meaning making have however been the most central classics for what we today call systemic social work.

The concept “systemic” has its origins in the family therapy literature. It was probably first time used by the Palo Alto group in the 1950ties or later in the Milan group in the late 1970s. The Milan group was influenced by general systems theory and the thoughts of anthropologist Gregory Bateson and his research project on communication in the 1950s at the Mental Research Institute MRI in Palo Alto. Bateson translated concepts from physics, engineering, biology and cybernetics and applied them into human interaction. Bateson emphasized the influence of context in therapeutic settings. He studied patterns of communication drawing on anthropology and ethnology in living systems and described information as “patterns that connect”. In his later works he was moving from patterns of behavior to patterns of meaning making. (Bateson 1972; Bateson 1979; Bateson & Bateson 1988.)

These ideas were adapted by therapists to move away from an intrapsychic view of the person to an interpersonal one and to help family therapists to make sense of puzzling and repetitive communication patterns in families (Hedges 2005; Jones 1993; Hoffman 1981). They permitted the therapists the freedom to move from the narrowness and linearity of individual theory towards broader and nonlinear concepts and problem-solving techniques that they found better suited for working with families. The Palo Alto group’s research concluded that families are homeostatic, rule-governed, closed informational systems that feed information back to themselves. They also concluded that all behavior is communication: the symptom no longer represented an individual disturbance, but a signal that a family was having difficulty meeting the demands of stress, change, or natural transition points. The meaning of the symptom was related to the family system’s structure and served the function of maintaining the homeostasis of the present system: its status, structure and organization and its stability, continuity, and relationship definition. This cybernetic concept of homeostasis including the central notions of equilibrium, negative feedback, resistance to change, continuous change, symptom functionality, and structural defect – became basics to the understanding of both healthy and pathological family organization. (Anderson 1997, 17-18).

### ***Systems theory in Social work***

Among the first to apply general systems theory to social work were Pincus and Minahan (1973; 1977) and Goldstein (1973; 1977). These theorists saw that social systems are open systems and therefore could provide a framework for social workers in their assessment of individuals, families and communities, and provide various targets of intervention when attempting to facilitate change in a system (Teater 2012, 17). Systems theorists like Pincus & Minahan (1973) generated complex models of social work in which everyone and everything was linked to and was affected by everyone and everything else in the service user’s life (Howe 2009, 114). This new generation of social work theorists described their social work models as “unitary” and “integrated in a big-picture way (Bartlett 1970). Systems theory provided an elegant conceptual framework in which to place this generic social work vision (Howe 2009, 116).

The generic systems ideas were not found really fit into the practice leading to a slow fragmentation. The big picture was a in a way a very true, but not really giving answers to the problems met in human centered practices (Howe 2009). However the systems and ecological approaches are profound to

social work theory. Writer of the globally applied book “Moderns social work theories” professor Malcolm Payne (2005, 157) perceives the systems and ecological approaches as backing both individual change and social reform. According to him (ibid) these systems include individuals, groups and communities, but they do not set preferences on any particular method of intervention. Instead, this theoretical frame provides an overall way of describing things at any level, so that we can understand all interventions as affecting systems. The early promises of systems theory were not live up as the ideas from natural and mathematical sciences did not translate well into the social work (Howe 2009, 120). Still, one can see a long line from e.g. Howard Goldstein’s work (Gray 2002) to holistic human and relation-based ideas of systemic social work of today (Murphy & al 2012).

### **The Milan group and second-order cybernetics - a step towards reflexivity**

The development of systemic ideas in family therapy has been important also for contemporary social work developments serving as a critique on losing the person in the generic systems (Ruch & al 2010). At the end of 1970s the Milan team noticed through their family therapy practice that the therapeutic field included all the other professionals that might be attached to a case and in supervision and consultation situations the therapists were to become aware of their own contribution to an “impasse” situation. This innovation forced the therapists to include him- or her-self in the as a part of the whole (Boscolo et al 1987, 12-13).

Milan group is also known for their interest in “second-order cybernetics” and posing the idea of the observer becoming a part of the description produced of the observed. This connotes that observing objectively would not at all be possible in the therapeutic systems. Furthermore, if the observer enters into that which is observed, there is no such thing as a separate observed system. Finally, since the way any observer perceives the world happens through the lens of culture, family, and language the resulting product represents not something private and self-contained but an “observer community” (ibid. 1987, 14).

Parallel to the recognition that cybernetic systems could be informed by both negative and positive feedback was the criticism on subject-object dualism: what had been thought of as observer-independent systems were now understood as observer-dependent systems or as what was called observing systems. These developments within the family therapy field became known as second-order cybernetics: it focused on the observer in the circularity of the observer-observed relationship and the creation of what is observed (von Foerster 1982, 22).

### **Postmodernism and deconstruction**

Postmodernists deny or deconstruct the existence of a single truth, or a cultural story, which unites humans under one only explanatory umbrella. The concept of grand narrative, or linguistic and narrative text, set of images or symbols that can be self-referring in reference to other symbols and words was critiqued. In order to new relevant theorizing to emerge, older systems of knowledge needed to be destabilized and replaced with new hybrid branches, which themselves would not remain static over time. Post-modernism became a de-construction phase thinking in giving space to

new ideas like the Goolishian's critique on professional hierarchies and closed expertise (Goolishian and Harlene Anderson, 1988). According to Anderson (1997, 20) cybernetic and Parsonian social theories tend to promote hierarchy and patriarchy – inequalities that unfortunately are normative both in our culture and even in intimate relationships such as those of parent and child, husband and wife, or in more detached social relationships such as those of welfare agencies and client family, teacher and student.

### **Social constructivism, social constructionism and the linguistic turn**

Social constructivism is based on the idea that individuals create knowledge, make sense of the world around them, and thus construct reality and a view of themselves. Social constructivism is basic for human beings and the psychological and social aspects of an individual work together helping to create and shape the individual's reality (Teater 2010, 71-72). The basic premises of social constructionism (ibid 76-78), again, can be explained as follows: Individuals have their reality and their ways of viewing the world. People are active participants in developing their knowledge of the world, not only passive recipients of stimulus-response interaction with their environment. An individual's reality and knowledge is placed in a historical and cultural context. It is developed through social interactions within these historical and cultural contexts. Language is used to express an individual's reality. There is no objective reality and there is no single truth. According to this logic the social worker should take a position of curiosity, act not-knowing, be non-expert and learn to use the client's language and the reality is co-constructed through dialogues (ibid 76-78.) It is the choices of words that count. Accordingly the concepts used have changed from "systemic" to "dialogic", "narrative" or "solution focused".

The reflective and reflexive approaches in social work are attempts to construct the professional relationship from vertical expertise to more horizontal forms of expertise (Parton & O'Byrne 2000) or from closed to open expertise (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005). The shifts in social scientific thinking (Gergen 2006) are moving from mind to discourse, from self to relationship, from singularity to polyvocality, from problems to prospects and from insight to action. In the family therapy field there are alike developments called collaborative (Anderson 2001), reflective (Andersen 1991), dialogical (Seikkula 2008) and narrative (White & Epston 1990; White 2007). These kind of collaborative approaches emphasize the mutual nature of therapeutic relationships. Therapists (or social workers) are not seen merely as delivering interventions but being a part of a mutual process of change in collaboration with their clients (Rautiainen 2010; Seikkula & Trimble 2005). Collaboration, communication and cooperation in interdisciplinary work were also welcome concepts in social work. Collaboration - across disciplines and across professions - was seen as the only realistic way to address the complexity and interconnectedness that describes the service user's experience and perspective as defined by systemic thinking.

### **Reflexivity and critical reflection**

Reflexivity could be defined as a stance we take towards the patterns we are co-creating when we communicate. On a practical level it can be seen as a set of practical skills and abilities that help us to

become aware of our own influence in different situations. Reflexivity involves reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön 1987). This involves not just an awareness of the self-in-action, but also a conscious engagement in what you know, what you do and why you do it. (Howe 2009, 171.) The 'magic' of reflexivity is the interesting realization that as we observe and engage with other people, we affect them, and as they are affected by us, in turn they affect us, and so in an evolving dynamic of interpersonal transactions. The reflexive practitioner explains Sheppard (2007, 129) shows a high degree of self-awareness, role awareness and awareness of assumptions underlying their practice. Fook (2002; 2007) blends elements of postmodernism, post-structuralism, critical social work, reflective practice and reflexivity into critical reflection. The approach encourages social workers to reflect critically on power- the worker also needs to be aware of how language shapes and defines service users and the way they experience themselves. (ibid. 2009, 171.) Reflexive practitioners as well as the people they work with are above all seen as subjects of their own actions and agency in a complex society with its persisting or even too quickly changing structures. Then the issue is again the question about change in one's own life and relationships as well as in societal structures. (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2009.)

A reflexive practitioner has the ability to connect micro- and macro-analysis and to reconcile recognition of her or his own participation in the process of inquiry (Howe 2009, 171; Hedges 2009, 2). Further reflexive expertise is defined as an inclination toward knowledge creation. This changes the relationship between the expert (a therapist, a social worker or a systemic co-worker) and the people they meet and serve – so central a question to the relation-based ideas in social work and in therapy. The basic problem that systemic thinking is trying to solve is that it is impossible to be systemic if acting according to systems approach in its psychoanalytic and psychological premises. It is this power implying relationship that the reflexive post- modern thinking tries to tackle when speaking about open-expertise and partnership in knowing and acting (Karvinen-Niinikoski; 2004; 2009). In systems theories Luhman's theories seem promising to treat this problem (Kilpeläinen 2009).

### **From fictive voices to reflective practise - FIKTIVE method (Katarina Fagerström)**

The Fiktive method is a dialogic model based on systemic thinking. It was developed by Katarina Fagerström (2010) in her research about expertise in recognising families with substance misuse related problems. The research design consisted of reflective workshops for a multi-professional group of practitioners from the fields of substance misuse treatment, psychiatry, school social work and child welfare services. The dialogic and reflective processes for questioning the needed expertise was stimulated by fictive novels about children growing up in families with alcoholism, drug addiction and other social problems.

Fictive novels and film materials have been used earlier in professional training for the purposes of widening professional perspectives. This kind of imaginative teaching can help professionals practice more reflexively by exposing for them different ways of representing what they themselves are doing. It may thereby create some critical distance and crucially foster openness and breadth to practice (Taylor & White 2006). Fiction is needed for cultivating reflective skill as the clients' cleverness to

conceal their difficulties easily misleads the professionals who may have difficulties even in recognizing their own emotional reactions not to speak of the weak or even the strongest signals of the so called wicked problems (Pösö 2005; 2011) sent for the clients, e.g. a child living in a drug abusing family. Professionals often tend just to stick to their own, categorizing explanations thus skipping the opportunity to see and listen to these signals. This would be necessary for further and deeper understanding and a true working dialogue for helping, but to listen might reveal wicked problems, difficult to combat.

It is this need for dialogic, reflexive, reflective, relational-based and systemic approach idea that brings us to Mikhail Bakhtin's all-important distinction between "explanation" and "understanding" in the context of how knowledge is generated and constructed in social work practices. Explanation in Bakhtin's terms is monologic and premised on the assumption that we come to know something first through empirical investigation and then proceed to explain our findings to others. Explanation is abstract and quite independent of its addressee, because only one active subject, the explainer; is involved. Authentic understanding is always dialogic: Understanding occurs where there is an exchange, a response, an answer back, perhaps also resistance (Irving & Young 2002).

Dialogue as Bakhtin (1981) developed the concept compels difference, uncertainty, playfulness, surprise, and open-endedness as necessary, positive, and productive aspects of the human condition. Dialogue is more than just talk or people exchanging words in a room. The more a word is used in our speech, the more contexts it gathers and its meanings proliferate with each encounter. What he calls "utterances" do not forget; they carry fragments from all our previous speech interactions as well as significance derived from the present context and forms of intonation. In this way all utterances are what Bakhtin calls "double-voiced," bringing with them the voice of the past but spoken in the here and now into an ongoing dialogue. For these reasons, utterances resist unity and closure and call for openness. The growth of our consciousness depends on its continual interaction with other voices, different personalities, and a diversity of worldviews. In dialogue there is no last word, no one interpretation, no single code, and no final truths (Emerson, 1997; Gergen, 1999). Dialogue can also be seen as discourses competing for their place in the center and forcing other discourses to the margins (Baxter 2011; Marková et al. 2007). Through critical reflection these power struggles are identified on all systemic levels, from personal on micro level to societal structures on the macro level.

According to the research plan the next step is to analyse further how the Fictive method provides "understanding" in Bakhtian terms, through systemic thinking, dialogue and critical reflection. It aims for a new expertise that consists of constructive, reflexive and innovative networked expertise (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005; 2009; Laitila 2009; Eräsaari 2003; Hakkarainen et al. 2004). It is an expertise that matches the urge to cope with the ever-changing complexity that has to be dealt with in every day practices.

## **Fasper project – introducing a facilitative model for mediation in the Finnish municipal family mediation service (Synnöve Karvinen-Niinikoski, Marina Bergman-Pyykkönen & al)**

Facilitative family mediation is a relation-based method in helping families in disputes to manage their mutual conflicts and agree about the best of their children and their own and shared parenthood in times of disputes and mainly when divorcing for agreeing the custody of the children. The multi-professional service system reaching from grass-root counseling by NGOs to the decision making courts seem just to have become worse and only leading to escalating really wicked and long-term divorcing conflicts burdening the family and child care services and courts with huge monetary costs and children's well-being as the victim. In this project the existing services in 6 partnership municipalities have been surged parallel to piloting the facilitative mediation approach. The research reports that the prevailing idea and organization of family mediation has been confusingly unclear for all parties involved – be it organizations, professionals or families needing these services. Most important is that in divorce situations professionals deal with a phenomena that are very sensitive, difficult to tackle and conceptualize and at the present situation a renewal of services is badly needed (Tapola-Haapala & al. 2012). This is what piloting research project Fasper is working for. The basic idea for Fasper along helping the services to be renewed through a method of researching and expansive learning for transformation (Engeström & al 2002) is to bring the dialogic idea and approach (called here the Fasper method) of facilitative family mediation (Parkinson 1987) into family mediation practices in Finland. This method follows the ideas of conflict resolution (Parkinson 2011) and has its roots both in family therapy and conflict resolution theories (Videlöv 2008, Pruit & Kim 2004). The practical idea is very simple: the disputing adults, the parents should be helped in entering a true dialogue about their decisions concerning their and the family's future including parenthood and the best of the children as well issue about housing, everyday living, economies and even the formal custody agreement. Simple though this sounds, these issues are full of passion and power negotiations, but with the support of a neutral and trained mediator and mediation services reason and love can win. Instead of becoming enemies the parent can establish and agree on a new kind of collaborative system as parents and caring adults. This kind of negotiation is according to both the research conducted in the Fasper -project and the Finnish research on divorce not easily available or supported – if known at all (Mattila-Aaltonen et al 2012).

### **Conclusions**

This article looks for the roots of the concept “systemic” in social work and family therapy literature. The historical path leads from modern systems theory to the postmodern linguistic turn, from first order cybernetics to second order cybernetics and further on to reflexivity and reflective practitioners. We suggest that a *systemic* view and relationship with clients can be established by critical reflection, where social workers are able to reflect upon how larger societal systems on macro level have their influence on interaction and relationships on a micro level. This makes social workers aware of the influence of context and possibilities to agency in relationship-based practices.

In this article we present two practices that were developed during the STEP-project, the FIKTIVE model and the FASPER project. According to our understanding systemic social work has its theoretical foundations in modern systems theory and postmodern linguistics and social constructionism. A further development of systemic thinking could be found in the latest and emerging discourses of pragmatics, as Steve Hothersall has suggested in his presentations in the STEP project and further as it is discussed in within the ideas of critical realism (Archer 2007; 2012). One definition among others for systemic social work is good practices that develop skills and understanding about human agency and human relations working with sometimes challenging, stiff and closed systems and domains in society. It is a dialogic and relationship-based way of being in and doing social work.

## **References**

Ahlzén, Rolf (2010) Why should physicians read? Understanding clinical judgement and its relation to literary experience. Karlstad, Universitetstryckeriet.

Andersen, Tom (1991) The reflecting team: Dialogues and dialogues about the dialogues. W.W. Norton, New York.

Anderson, Harlene & Goolishian, Harry (1988) Human systems as linguistic systems: Evolving ideas about the implications for theory and practice. *Family process* 27, 371-393.

Anderson, Harlene (1997) Conversation, language, and possibilities. A postmodern approach to therapy. Basic books, New York.

Anderson, Harlene (2001) Postmodern collaborative and person-centered therapies: What would Carl Rogers say? *Journal of Family Therapy*, 23 (4), 339-360

Anderson, Harlene and Gehart, Diane (2007) Collaborative Therapy. Relationships and conversations that make a difference. Routledge, New York.

Archer, Margaret (2007) Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility. Cambridge university press, NY.

Archer, Margaret (2012) The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity, Cambridge university press, NY.

Arnkil, Tom, Eriksson, Esa & Hoffman, Lynn (2009) Dialogical meetings in social networks. Karnak Books/ Systematic thinking and practice series. London: Karnak Books.

Arvilommi, Petri (1998). Narratiivinenterapia. Perheterapia (Narrative therapy, *Journal of Family Therapy*) 2/1998, 4-35.

Bahtin, Micahel (1984) Problems of Dostojevskij's poetics *Theory and History of Literature: Vol.8* Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Bartlett, H.M. (1970) The common base of social work practice. Washington, D.C., NASW.

Bateson, Gregory (1972) Steps to an ecology of mind. A revolutionary approach to man's understanding of himself. Ballantine books, New York.

Bateson, Gregory (1979) Mind and Nature. A necessary Unity. Bantam books, New York.

- Bateson, Gregory & Bateson, Mary Catherine (1987/1988) *Angels fear. Där änglar är rädda att gå*. Symposium bokförlag & trycker, Stockholm.
- Boscolo, Luigi & Ceccin, Gianfranco & Hoffman, Lynn & Penn, Peggy (1987) *Milan systemic family therapy. Conversations in theory and practice*. Basic books, New York.
- Depoy, Elisabeth & Glison Stephen French (2012) Sage, Singapore.
- Furman, Ben (2004) *Kid's skills – Playful and Practical Solution Finding with Children*.
- Furman, Ben (1998) *It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood: From Adversity to Resilience*.
- Furman, Ben & Ahola, Tapani (1992) *Solution Talk: Hosting Therapeutic Conversations*.
- Engeström, Yrjö, Engeström, Ritva & Suntio, Arja-Tuulikki (2002) *Can a school community learn to master its own future? An activity theoretical study of expansive learning among middle school teachers*. In G. Wells, G. Claxton (Eds.) *Learning for life in the 21st Century*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 211–224.
- Eräsaari, R. (2003) 'Open-context expertise', in *Yearbook 2003 of the Institute for Advanced Studies on Science, Technology and Society, Technik- und Wissenschaftsforschung [Science and Technology Studies]*, eds A. Bamme, G. Gertzinger & B. Wieser, Vol. 41, Profil, Munchen-Wien, pp. 31-65.
- Gray, Mel (2012) *Art, Irony and Ambiguity : Howard Goldstein and his Contribution to Social Work. Qualitative Social Work* Vol. 1(4): 413-433).
- Hakkarainen, K., Palonen, T., Paavola, S. & Lehtinen, E. (2004) *Communities of Networked Expertise. Professional and Educational Perspectives*, Sitra's (The Finnish National Fund for Research and Development) Publication Series, no. 257, Elsevier Ltd, Oxford.
- Hedges, Fran (2005) *An introduction to systemic therapy with individuals. A social constructionist approach*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Gergen, Kenneth (2006) *Therapeutic realities: Collaboration, oppression and relational flow*. Cleveland: Taos Institute Publications
- Heino, Tarja , Reinikainen, Sarianna& Bergman, Marina (2003) *Familje rådslag i Norden* Forskningsinstitutet, Svenska social- och kommunalhögskolan vid Helsingfors universitet, Meddelanden 66. Helsinki: SSKH.
- Heino, Tarja (2009) *Family Group Conference from a Child Perspective*. Nordic Research Report. <http://www.thl.fi/thl-client/pdfs/da905b95-70f6-4db8-9d82-91b74fe55ed0>
- Hoffman, Lynn (1981) *Foundations of family therapy.A conceptual framework for systems change*. Basic books, New York.
- Howe, David (2009) *A brief introduction to social work theory*.Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Irving, A & Young, T. (2002) *Paradigms for pluralism: Michael Bakhtin and social work practice*.*Social Work* 47 (1), pp. 19-29.

Juhila, Kirsi (2006) Sosiaalityöntekijöinä ja asiakkaina. Sosiaalityön yhteiskunnalliset tehtävät ja paikat. Vastapaino, Tampere.

Karvinen, Synnöve (1996) Sosiaalityön ammatillisuus modernista professionaalisuudesta refleksiiviseen asiantuntijuuteen (the ideas of Professional methods and Reflective Practice in Social Work from Modern professionalism to new expertise). Doctoral Thesis. Kuopio University Publications E, Social Sciences.

Karvinen-Niinikoski, Synnöve (2004) Social work supervision contributing to innovative knowledge production and open expertise. In Gould, N & Baldwin, J (ed.) Social Work, Critical Reflection and the Learning Organisation. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, pp. 23 – 39.

Karvinen-Niinikoski, Synnöve (2005) Research orientation and expertise in social work - challenges for social work education. European Journal of Social Work, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2005, pp. 259-271.

Karvinen-Niinikoski, S., Salonen, J., Meltti, T., Yliruka, L., & Tapola, M. (2005). *Konstikas sosiaalityö 2003: suomalaisen sosiaalityön todellisuus ja tulevaisuudennäkymät* [The realities and visions of social work practice in Finland 2003]. (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön selvityksiä 28). Helsinki, FI: Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö.

Karvinen-Niinikoski, Synnöve (2009) Promises and pressures of critical reflection for social work coping in change. European Journal of Social work vol. 12/3. pp. 333- 348.

Laitila, Aarno (2009) The Expertise Question Revisited: Horizontal and Vertical Expertise. Contemporary Family Therapy vol 31, 239-250.

Luhmann, Niklas (1984): *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp (English translation: *Social Systems*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Mattila-Aalto, Minna, Bergman-Pyykkönen, Marina, Haavisto, Vaula & Karvinen-Niinikoski, Synnöve (2012) Konfliktiteoreettinen näkökulma eroihin ja palvelujen kehittämiseen (A conflict-theoretical approach on divorcing and development on family mediation services.) in Kääriäinen, A, Hämäläinen, J & Pölkki, P. (eds) *Challenges of Divorce, interventions and children*. Hämeenlinna: Ensi- ja Turvakotienliitto - The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters in Finland, pp. 213 – 241.

Meltti, T., & Kara, H. (2009) Sosiaalityöntekijöiden työolot, - ympäristö ja työhyvinvointi sekä niihin vaikuttavat tekijät [Working conditions, - environment and well-being at work and factors affecting them]. In L. Yliruka, J. Koivisto, & S. Karvinen-Niinikoski (Eds.), *Sosiaalialan työolojen hyvä kehittäminen* [Development of working conditions in social services] (pp. 22–32). (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön julkaisuja 6). Helsinki, FI: Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö.

Murphy, David, Duggan, Maria and Joseph, Stephen (2012) Relationship-Based Social Work and Its Compatibility with the Person-Centred Approach: Principled versus Instrumental Perspectives. British Journal of Social Work (2012) 1–17.

Parkinson, Lisa (2011) Family Mediation. Appropriate Dispute Resolution in a New Family Justice System. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Bristol: Jordan Publishing Ltd.

- Parkinson, Lisa (1987) *Separation, Divorce and Families*. London: McMillan Education Ltd.
- Parton, Nigel & O'Byrne, Patrick (2000) *Constructive Social Work. Towards new practice*. McMillan press, Basingstoke.
- Payne, Malcolm (2005) *Modern social work theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Pincus, Allen and Minahan, Anne (1973) *Social work practice: a model and method*. Istaca, III: Peacock.
- Pösö, Tarja (2011) *Combatting Child Abuse in Finland: From Family to Child-Centered Orientation*. In: Neil Gilbert, Nigel Parton & Marit Skivenes (eds). *Child Protection Systems. International Trends and Orientations*. New York, Oxford University Press, 112–130.
- Pösö, Tarja (2005) *Ilkeät ongelmat, hyvät käytännöt*. FinSoc. *Sosiaalialan menetelmien arviointi* (2), 4-6. Helsinki: Stakes.
- Rautiainen, Eija-Liisa (2010) *Co-construction and Collaboration in Couple Therapy for Depression*. *Jyväskylä studies in education, psychology and social research* 396, University of Jyväskylä.
- Riikonen E, Vataja S, Makkonen M. *Kuntoutus ja arkielämän taide: kertomuksellinen ajattelu, vakava leikki ja poeettiset asiakastyön mallit*. Kirjassa: Hänninen V.ym. , toim. Kunnan tarinoita – Tarinallinen näkökulma kuntoutukseen. Helsinki: Kuntoutussäätiön tutkimuksia 58, s. 126–39.
- Ruch, G., Turney, D. and Ward, A. (2010) *Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Seikkula, Jaakko (2002). *Open Dialogues with good and poor outcomes for psychotic crises: Example from families with violence*. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 28, 263-274.
- Seikkula, Jaakko & Olson, Mary E. (2003) *Open Dialogue Approach to Acute Psychosis: Its Poetics and Micropolitics*. *Family Process*, Vol 42, No 3. pp. 403-418.
- Seikkula, Jaakko & Thrimble, D (2005) *Healing elements of therapeutic conversation: Dialogue as an embodiment of love*. *Family Process* 44(4), 461-475.
- Seikkula, Jaakko & Arnkil Tom (2006) *Dialogical meetings in social networks*. Karnac books.
- Seikkula, Jaakko (2008) *Inner and outer voices in the present moment of family and network therapy*. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 30 (4), 478-491.
- Tapola-Haapala, Maria & Karvinen-Niinikoski, Synnöve & Kääriäinen, Aino (2012) *Parental Divorce and Children in Finland*. In Kääriäinen, A ,Hämäläinen, J & Pölkki, P. (eds) *Challenges of Divorce, Interventions and Children*. Hämeenlinna: Ensi- jaTurvakotienliitto - The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters in Finland, pp. 99- 123.
- Taylor, Carolyn & White, Sue (2006) *Knowledge and Reasoning in Social Work: Educating for Humane Judgement* *British Journal of Social Work* (2006) 36, 937–954
- Teater, Barbara (2012) *an introduction to applying social work theories and methods*. Open university press, Maidenhead.

Weiss-Gal, Idit (2009) Teaching Critical Perspectives: Analyses of Professional Practice in the Film Ladybird, Ladybird Social Work Education Vol. 28, No. 8, December 2009, pp. 873–886

White, Michael (2007) Maps to narrative practice. W.W. Norton, New York.

White, Michael & Epston, David (1990) Narrative means to therapeutic ends. W.W. Norton, New York.

Wilson, K., Ruch, G., Lymbery, M. and Cooper, A. (2009) Social Work: An Introduction to Contemporary Practice, London, Longman.

Yliruka L., Koivisto J., & Karvinen-Niinikoski, S. (Eds.) (2009). *Sosiaalialan työolojen hyvä kehittäminen* [Development of working conditions in social services]. (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön julkaisu 6). Helsinki, FI: Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö.

## At Least Seven Possibilities – Systemic Social Work in Germany

Johannes Herwig-Lempp, Hochschule Merseburg

### **Abstract**

*"There are at least seven possibilities" – for how one sees, describes or explains something, but also for how to act. The Merseburger approach to systemic social work is autonomy-based, i.e. it puts the focus on the individuals' desire and right to decide for themselves what is good for them. A vision of humanity emerges on the basis of a number of theoretical assumptions that allows social workers to see their clients as capable and as equals. The concrete methods and their implementation in social work practice are derived in turn. Since systemic concepts are primarily applied in the contexts of therapy and counseling in Germany, it is important, among other things for our professional self-perception, to accentuate the difference between social work on the one hand and counseling and therapy on the other. An appendix extends to view beyond the approach as it is taught in Merseburg.*

---

*"Es gibt immer mindestens sieben Möglichkeiten" – etwas zu sehen, zu beschreiben und zu erklären, aber auch zu handeln. Der Merseburger Ansatz der systemischen Sozialarbeit ist autonomie-basiert, d.h. er stellt den Wunsch und das Recht von Menschen, selbst bestimmen zu können, was gut für sie ist, in den Mittelpunkt. Vor dem Hintergrund einer Reihe theoretischer Annahmen entsteht ein Menschenbild, das den SozialarbeiterInnen ermöglicht, ihre KlientInnen als vollwertig und ebenbürtig zu sehen. Daraus lassen sich Methoden und konkrete Umsetzungen für die Praxis der Sozialen Arbeit ableiten. Da in Deutschland systemische Konzepte hauptsächlich im therapeutischen und beraterischen Kontext vermittelt werden, ist es u.a. für das professionelle Selbstbewusstsein wichtig, den Unterschied zwischen Sozialer Arbeit einerseits und Beratung und Therapie andererseits hervorzuheben. – Ein Appendix weitet den Blick über Merseburg hinaus.*

### **Introduction**

"Systemic social work" is still not yet widespread in Germany. To date, systemic approaches are used above all in therapy and counseling. Whether a form of "systemic social work" exists or should exist outside of the framework of therapy and counseling is debated.

In the 1970s and 1980s, US-American and Italian books and a growing number of German-language publications, growing numbers of conferences, workshops and trainings led to the spread of systemic / family therapy concepts and methods. The access to training for the different professions was uncomplicated, the freshness and unusual nature of its contents and its practicality probably contributed significantly to the spread of family therapy and later of systemic approaches in social work. Today, "knowledge of systemic counseling" often is mentioned as requirement in vacancy announcements for social workers - even if it is at times unclear, what exactly this means.

The systemic field is a large market in Germany, a variety of large and small institutes have emerged offering a wide variety of training and qualification modules in systemic counseling and therapy.

The two major systemic therapy umbrella organisations - the DGSF and the SG<sup>4</sup> - have each developed (similar) certification systems that are based primarily on formal criteria (scope, qualification of teaching staff). The fact that these modules usually take place under the title "therapy/counseling" (and not at all on "social work") is, on the other hand, a discreet form of discrimination, i.e. discrimination by the omission of the unique aspects of social work<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Theories – Attitudes – Methods: The Merseburg concept of systemic social work***

For me, the systemic-constructivist approach is a tool<sup>6</sup> that consists of theories, attitudes/world view and methods. The basis can be seen as "the systemic perspective", i.e. a set of theoretical axioms (suppositions), assumptions about "human nature" as well as criteria for a methodical approach that relate to the specificities of professional social work. These suppositions are presented as axioms, free of any claims to their „truth“ or completeness. The axioms are not justified; the only important thing is of and where they can be effectively applied.

#### **A) Theoretical suppositions**

- The environment that we perceive is our invention. (Heinz von Foerster)
- Objectivity is the delusion of a subject. (Heinz von Foerster/ Ernst von Glasersfeld)
- Everything said is said by someone. (Maturana/Varela)

These three assumptions form a constructivist foundation: reality is not directly accessible to us, we must interpret reality (using our body and our mind). The fact of this this subjectivity, the reduction of our point of view alone to our own person, is our blind spot.

Once we understand reality as something that is constructed, we can then try to deconstruct it and then reconstruct it in a new way: we are responsible for how we perceive to be reality (or what we consider it to be) and how we shape it.

- Problems are a matter of opinion.
- It could be different.
- There are always at least seven possibilities.

Under these conditions and from this perspective, problems no longer „exist“. Instead, they are descriptions, ideas and concepts developed by people and adapted by them. When two people say "we have a problem", this can be "liquefied" without difficulty: neither do they have the same problem

---

<sup>4</sup> The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Therapie, Beratung und Familientherapie (German Association for Systemic Therapy, Counselling and Family Therapy,; DGSF) with over 4000 members (of which an estimated quarter to a third are social workers!) and the Systemische Gesellschaft (Systemic Association – SG), which was founded originally by various training institutions. Several years ago a Deutsche Gesellschaft für systemische Soziale Arbeit (German Association for Systemic Social Work – DGSSA) was founded by university professors, but it has yet to grow beyond ca. 100 members.

<sup>5</sup> This is also true for other professions that could be dealt with more sensitively in the systemic field.

<sup>6</sup> Considering I understand theories and approaches as tools (cf. Herwig-Lempp 2009), it stands to reason that I find it less than productive to look for "real" tools or to insist on "definitive, standardized" instruments.

nor do these problems always remain the same. It is worth it to ask, when and in what situations who exactly „has“ a problem with what – and when this is different.

Every description, every explanation, every perspective is contingent, i.e. it could be different. Thus I can always develop further perspectives, explanations and descriptions – and in doing so develop new possibilities for action. Only when I assume that I can describe, explain and experience something differently will I begin to look for possible alternatives.

- Everything flows. Change is a constant.
- We can only move ahead, we can't move back.
- Small changes lead to further changes.

The supposition that change is a constant is both a helpful and necessary prerequisite for starting an attempt to change something. If change already takes place constantly, the attempt influence this change makes senses.

From a systemic point of view, relapses are impossible; any apparent relapse or even stagnation can just as easily be perceived as forward movement. Experience makes it impossible to return to some previous point of departure.

An old systemic model is that of the mobile: everything is related to everything. If it is possible to trigger movement at one point, this will also have an impact at other points (sometimes it is just a question of whether we are able to focus our attention on these other points to observe these changes).

## **B) Suppositions on attitudes/the human condition**

A central issue is the image of humanity: how do we perceive the people with whom we work, both clients and colleagues. One might say, summarily, that they are just as I perceive myself. They are no different from me. This assumption can be especially helpful when I have developed a completely different impression based on my experience and my feelings, when I am of the opinion, I cannot understand someone else. Just then it may be helpful to regard them as being just like me.

- All people are autonomous and “eigensinnig” (make their own sense of the world).
- People always do what they want.
- Mixed feelings (ambivalencies) are normal.
- Everyone has a good reason for doing what he/she does.

In Western society, the individual is of primal importance: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." (Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The right to self-determination ( to be "free"), is just as much an unconditional right as is dignity, reason and conscience. This cannot be denied anyone. Everyone wants to determine for themselves and does so – with the limits of their available and identifiable possibilities. All human beings are thus „eigensinnig“,

i.e. they have their own head and their own will, they determine how they look at the world and how they interpret it, how they attribute intrinsic meaning to situations/ their perceptions).

Consequently, people are, from a systemic point of view, are in a position to "always do what they want" (cf. Efran et al. 1989, p 10). They always chose that option from those available to them that they regard as the best – after weighing the pros and cons (and sometimes they see, as mentioned, far fewer options than they actually have).

From their own individual perspective, they thus gave „good reasons“ for what they do, for the choices they have made. Their actions make sense in their personal context, they are "reasonable", even when outsiders see this differently and understand their actions or decisions completely differently. This assumption allows me to work with people whose behaviour is incomprehensible to me and appears (according to my standards) unreasonable.

- Instructive interaction is not possible. (Maturana/Varela)

People are no machines, they live, are „eigensinnig“, autonomous, independent. In this respect we believe that every individual is different – and that no techniques exist that we could use to make them "function"; people cannot be "programmed" or controlled reliably.

- All people want to cooperate all the time.
- All human beings are equal with respect to these assumptions.

These two assumptions convince me, especially with difficult clients, to be especially persistent and patient looking for signs of their willingness to cooperate and their "normality" – and then to reveal them. How many of these basic assumptions, they can be especially helpful when they appear most unlikely or even absurd.

The less obvious and appropriate all these suppositions appear at first glance, the more useful and meaningful their application is: the more unchangeable a situation or a person appears to me, the more important it is that change is assumed; the more helpless a person appears to me, the more helpful it is (for me and for them), if they are assumed to be autonomous and “eigensinnig”.

The absolute nature of these statements ("all", "always", "is") does not imply their truth. Instead, it expresses their status as suppositions, as definitions that may (but must not) be applied without exception. And, of course, the underline the challenges that they represent for me.

The theories, attitudes and practices of the systemic approach are particularly suitable for social work. They can contribute to (re)establishing the capability to act (influence potential, "power"), both of the social worker as well as their clients. In the everyday work of a social worker, reality appears in many situations to be especially "hard" and immutable, change all too often appears impossible, people appear driven (from inside and out), controlled and helpless. Social workers deal with very complex situations and get involved in different ways, even and especially when they act against the wishes of their clients, when they negotiate and facilitate, when they obtain goods or even when they are simply "there." In these cases a systemic approach can be a useful tool - with its theoretical suppositions and its methodical options.

### C) Methodical and practical focus: My systemic view

These assumptions may be understood as theoretical elements, but they might also be interpreted as guidelines for their practical implementation. In Merseburg I also use to represent what I understand to "systemic social work", a "systemic view".

To work "systemically" for me means among other things that I cannot forget that there exist perspectives other than my own present, trusted or even imaginable perspectives. To that extent, the systemic approach can also be understood as a point of view (as one of many possible points of view) that one can apply in social work. If I want to look "systemically", then I can, for example, look at the following:

My systemic view is directed towards

- Resources, strengths, abilities and achievements
- Contexts
- Different perspectives
- Mandates
- Exceptions, solutions, the future
- The multiplication of options
- Autonomy and own ideas
- Willingness to cooperate
- Feelings, moods, atmosphere and humour
- Appreciation

Various methodological options emerge from this perspective.

**Resources:** I can, for example, look specifically to identify and focus on a person's resources. What can they do well? What else might they do well? What do they like about their child (with whom they are having so much trouble at the moment)? What are the advantages hidden in their current problem or their difficult situation?

**Contexts:** I can ask about the specific circumstances in which a particular problem or specific form of behaviour occurs. I can create a genogram or a VIP-card and thereby get an overview of context in which individuals interact.

**Different perspectives:** I can ask, who sees something a specific way? And who has a different perspective / view / opinion? What others might there be? I can work with sculptures, small or large role-playing scenarios to illustrate different points of view.

**Mandates:** I can explore the mandates; ("How can I help?" "Who has what expectations and demands from me – clients, colleagues, superiors"?) take them up, refuse them, negotiate or ignore them - and definitely reflect on them.

Exceptions, solutions, the future: I look for and elucidate exceptions to a problem ("When is there no problem?" "When does someone deal well with it?") and find solutions ("What could be a solution – and what else?"). I can focus on the future ("What are possible solutions?") instead of the past ("What exactly was the problem?").

The multiplication of options: I can try to develop several (not just one) plans of action or solutions ("There are at least seven ways: let us look for and find us.")

Autonomy and own ideas: I can ask people what their ideas they have for solving a problem – and what path they would choose (instead of suggesting or prescribe them). I can always ask "What is important to you? How can we take that into consideration?"

Willingness to cooperate: I can – especially when someone does not want to work with me – think about how I might identify signs of cooperation. I can ask under what conditions the other might feel the need for a minimum of cooperation. I can reveal my own conditions and under what conditions these might be negotiable.

Feelings, moods, atmosphere and humour: I can discuss feelings, ask about them and respond to them. I can develop an understanding for them (even if I do not share them) and I can work with humour: when we laugh at something, we show that it can be viewed from different perspectives, and thus we reveal our mental agility.

Appreciation: I can strive for appreciation – even and especially when I find it difficult. Finding occasions for compliments changes my perspective, my focus, the direction of my own searching – and also my attitude to my counterpart, even before this appreciation takes its effect on them.

Quite apart from the fact that all of these aspects are already a form of appreciation for my counterpart – which is in itself a condition for further cooperation.

### ***Current Developments in Germany***

So far, I have presented my own concept and my own approach. They are not alone. From my perspective, the strength of the systemic concept is that it permits variety even on its theoretical and practical levels and permits a variety of options.

Differences in the various approaches are founded in claims to a closed theoretical construction or references to systems theoretical, development psychological, family dynamic or constructivist concepts and the degree to which claim is made to have developed an approach specific to the profession. In the appendix I have listed some German representatives of systemic social work and a short selection of their publications as well as a short summary of their perspective on systemic social work.

The discussion on systemic social work is relatively marginal within the systemic field in Germany. The major associations see no need to elaborate on professional social work from a systemic point of view. The German Association for Systemic Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für systemische Soziale Arbeit - DGSSA) remains small and has not made any significant waves. It has organised several

smaller conferences in various regions in Germany in recent years. It publishes an online magazine (dgssa\_journal) and is in the process of developing a certification for systemic social work. (While no other journal that specialises in systemic social work exists, at least three of the major systemic journals in Germany accept contributions on social work and by social workers: KONTEXT, systema, Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung).

Despite the demand for knowledge of systemic (counseling and therapy) in the field of social work, universities and Universities for Applied Sciences (the convenient schools where social workers get their professional training in Germany) are reluctant to offer systemic seminars or programmes, limiting themselves to either seminars on system theory or inviting teaching therapists from private institutions to give workshops. In Merseburg I myself offer three 4-day-long seminars (spread over different semesters) on systemic social work that mainly introduce students to methodical tools and practise their implementation. For several years now I have begun to reserve several places in these seminars for practitioners who are interested in systemic training and pay a fee to the university. The teaching process profits significantly from their practical perspective and thus, all three sides (students, practitioners and teacher) profit from this combination.

The first German master's programme for systemic social work was established in Merseburg and ran from 2009 to 2011. The modules include, among others, theory, methods, practical implementation, research and evaluation, instruction, leadership and social economics. It also included an English language course, an excursion abroad and a final paper or workshop at a conference<sup>7</sup>. Demand for the programme is there, so it will be offered again in 2013-2015. Other universities in Germany apparently see no need or do not have the capacity to develop such a programme.

Since 2004 an irregular series of conferences on systemic social work have been held at various universities in Germany with 50 to 250 participants, who saw themselves as part of a specific tradition, most recently the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Merseburg Conference about Systemic Social Work "2 x 2 = grün - Die Vielfalt der systemischen Sozialarbeit"<sup>8</sup> in July 2011 and (bilingual) "Acht' auf den Abstand! – Möglichkeitsräume in der Sozialarbeit // Mind the Gap! – Potential Space in Systemic Social Work" in October 2012. Whether this series will be continued is also an open question.

### ***The unique aspects of social work***

While probably more than a quarter of trained systemicists are social workers both by profession and in their day-to-day work, few if any explicit concepts of systemic thought and practice for the specificities of this profession exist.

The most important systemic authors and trainers consider themselves therapists and counselors and have studied psychology and medicine - or they are social workers, who have "jumped ship" and now no longer consider themselves social workers but "(teaching) therapists", "supervisors" or, at the least, "counselors" and describe themselves as such. The focus is on therapy and counseling and the

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information see [www.sysoma.de](http://www.sysoma.de)

<sup>8</sup> 2 x 2 = Green - The Diversity of Systemic Social Work

qualifications that one receives is implicitly understood as such. Insofar as social work is discussed at all, it is understood as identical to counseling.

What tends to be disregarded, is that social work is much richer, more varied and (if you will) is more demanding than simple counseling and therapy<sup>9</sup>.

- The work between a social worker and client includes, in addition to simple counseling, a whole range of other kinds of activities (cf. Lüssi 2001, p. 392ff). These include negotiation with clients and other agencies and frequently facilitation between various institutions and parties, obtaining a means of living (i.e. money, housing, employment, contacts, access) for clients; often they control, intervene, regulate, for example, access to help and thus at times clearly act against the wishes of their clients. Social workers act and make decisions on behalf of clients and, finally, they are often "simply there", receptive, waiting, apparently doing nothing at all - and yet it is an essential part of their work (and can include "professional waiting" "professional coffee drinking" and "professional football playing").<sup>10</sup>
- Social workers most often work in the context of very complex situations and expectations. In a single "case" (better: practice situation, client, assignment, mandate) many people are often involved or need to be involved, all in consideration of various mandates, laws, terms and conditions. Social workers work at the interface between people, professions and interests, they mediate and negotiate between them. They carry great responsibility, every day they make a variety of large and small, not always conscious decisions that may have a substantial impact on their clients and on their work with them.
- Social workers have to deal with a variety of settings in which they are far from a defined space for consultations; from in home visits or group home visits, from street work to an appointment at the doctor, a diner with the residential group to a visit in a discotheque, from accompanying a client to a lawyer to participating at a trial, from a day pass with a convict to a hospital visit - all this and much more is understood as a matter of course in social work (and is often enough not reflected upon critically in teaching).
- Social workers often work within organisations, in teams and networks. Therefore they must not only consider the interests of their clients, their employers and the cost bearers but also the institutions, colleagues and partners involved. They often work together in teams and are connected to regional networks.

These specific aspects of social work are usually not addressed in systemic training modules because the trainers (teaching therapists) are not aware of them or consider them irrelevant. Beside the focus on therapy and counseling the specific situation of and demands on social workers are often

---

<sup>9</sup> cf also a recent discussion following an article „Social Work is More Demanding than Therapy” by Johannes Herwig-Lempp and Ludger Kühling (2012)

<sup>10</sup> This "simply being there" is a common practice in social work (in Germany). It is nevertheless hardly reflected upon theoretically and is not taught.

overlooked and thus neglected. The inability of trainers to take into consideration the overall context of social work remains a barrier to the development of systemic social work as its own concept.

This fact has consequences not the least of which is the (self-)understanding of the work of the participant social workers and practitioners of other professions who may come to the conclusion that it is only possible to work (systemically) in counseling and therapy situations. And it stands in the way of an appreciation for the fact that it could be interesting and rewarding to work systemically as a social worker.

It is for this reason that, in my mind, it is necessary - at least for a certain period of time - to develop a specific approach to systemic social work, to do justice to the professional specificities of social work and to strengthen the professional identity of social workers. Not all actors in the field of systemic social work see it this way.

## **Appendix**

### **Some well-known contributors to systemic social work in Germany<sup>11</sup>**

- Wolf Ritscher, psychologist, retired Professor at the Hochschule Esslingen, one of the first scholars of systemic social work, proponent of a psychoanalytical development-oriented approach (Ritscher 2002, 2007)
- Ulrich Pfeifer-Schaupp, professor for Social Work at the Hochschule Freiburg, authored two books on systemic social work 10 and 15 years ago (Pfeifer-Schaupp 1995, 2002)
- Ludger Kühling, philosopher and social worker, trainer, supervisor – occasional publications, co-developer of the master's program in Merseburg (Kühling 2004, Herwig-Lempp & Kühling 2012)
- Heiko Kleve, Social worker with practical experience as a case worker, Professor at the Hochschule Potsdam, active proponent of a constructivist approach, draws among others on Luhmann and his systems theory, interested in professional questions, authored many books (Kleve 2000, 2007)
- Wilfried Hosemann, pedagogue and co-founder of the systemic movement in Germany (DAF), Chairman of the DGSSA (Hosemann & Geiling 2005)
- Johannes Herwig-Lempp, social worker, Professor for systemic social work/ science of social work and founder of the first German master's programme for systemic social work (Herwig-Lempp 2012, 1994)
- Jürgen Hargens, psychologist, one of the first systemic practitioners to receive wider recognition in Germany, founder and editor of the Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und

---

<sup>11</sup> Note: Also Austrian (e.g. Milowiz) and Swiss scholars (e.g. Vögtli, Geiser, Lüssi) publish in the German language, are read and have an influence on the German scene, even if they are not mentioned here explicitly.

Beratung [Journal for Systemic Therapy and Councelling], open to new forms of (social) work (Hargens 1993, 2000)

### **Systemic German Web Pages**

A selection of web pages on systemic social work and the systemic field in Germany:

- German Association for Systemic Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Soziale Arbeit - DGSSA): [www.dgssa.org](http://www.dgssa.org)
- German Association for Systemic Therapy, Counseling and Family Therapy, (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Systemische Therapie und Familientherapie - DGSF): [www.dgsf.org](http://www.dgsf.org)
- Master's program for Systemic Social Work (sysoma), [www.sysoma.de](http://www.sysoma.de) [Author: J. Herwig-Lempp]
- Systemic social work, [www.systemische-sozialarbeit.de](http://www.systemische-sozialarbeit.de) [Author: J. Herwig-Lempp]
- Systemic Society (Systemische Gesellschaft - SG), [www.systemische-gesellschaft.de](http://www.systemische-gesellschaft.de)

### **German Journals**

- Kontext, <http://www.v-r.de/de/zeitschriften/500049/>
- Familiendynamik (<http://www.familiendynamik.de/>)
- systemmagazin – online-Zeitschrift ([www.systemmagazin.de](http://www.systemmagazin.de))
- systema (<http://www.if-weinheim.de/systema.html>)
- Systeme (<http://www.oeas.at/systeme/>)
- Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung (<http://www.verlag-modernes-lernen.de/docs/systemische.php>)

### **References**

Hargens, Jürgen (1993), KundIn, KundigE, KundschafterIn. Gedanken zur Grundlegung eines "helfenden" Zugangs [Client, expert, scout. Thoughts on the development of a "helping" approach]; in: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie, Vol. 11 Nr.1, pp. 14-20;

Hargens, Jürgen (ed.) (2000); Gastgeber hilfreicher Gespräche. Wir haben Ihnen geholfen!? Was haben wir von Ihnen gelernt? Systemische Ansätze in der sozialpädagogischen Familienhilfe [Host for helpful conversations. We have helped you!? What can we learn from you? Systemic approaches in socio-paedagogical family support]; Dortmund: Borgmann

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes & Ludger Kühling (2012), Sozialarbeit ist anspruchsvoller als Therapie [social work is more demanding than therapy], in: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung, 2/2012, S. 50-56

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2012), Ressourcenorientierte Teamarbeit. Ein Lern- und Übungsbuch, [Resource oriented teamwork. A text and work book] 2nd edition ; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2009), Theorien sind Werkzeuge [Theories are tools], in: Bernd Birgmeier & Eric Mührel (Hrsg.) (2009), Die Sozialarbeitswissenschaft und ihre Theorie(n). Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven, Wiesbaden (Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften), S. 185-197

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (2000), Aus Erfolgen lernen: Ein Instrument der Selbstevaluation. Sechs Argumente und ein Leitfaden zum Sprechen über Erfolge [Let's talk about success! Guidelines and 6 arguments why to talk about successful experiences], in: Systema 2/2000, Jg. 14, S. 185-195 [english version as pdf:

<http://www.herwig-lempp.de/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/0202successJHL.pdf>]

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (1996), Drug Addiction, The Systemic Approach, and the Concept of „Acceptance“, in: Journal of Systemic Therapies Vol. 15, 2/1996, S. 24-35 und S. 67-68 (as pdf)

Herwig-Lempp, Johannes (1994), Von der Sucht zur Selbstbestimmung. Drogenkonsumenten als Subjekte [From addiction to self-determination. Drug users as subjects]; Dortmund: verlag modernes lernen

Hosemann, Wilfried & Wolfgang Geiling (2005), Einführung in die systemische Soziale Arbeit [Introduction to systemic social work]; Freiburg; Lambertus;

Kleve, Heiko (2007); Postmoderne Sozialarbeit. Ein systemtheoretisch-konstruktivistischer Beitrag zur Sozialarbeitswissenschaft [Post-modern social work. A system-theoretical constructivist contribution to the science of social work]; (orig. 1999); Wiesbaden: VS - Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften;

Kleve, Heiko (2000), Die Sozialarbeit ohne Eigenschaften. Fragmente einer postmodernen Professions- und Wissenschaftstheorie Sozialer Arbeit [Social work without a face. Fragments of a post-modern professional and scientific theory of social work]; Freiburg: Lambertus

Kühling, Ludger; 2004; Was könnten wir tun, um die Bedeutung der Systemischen Sozialarbeit möglichst gering zu halten? [What can we do to make systemic social work as meaningless as possible?]; in: KONTEXT, 4/2004, Vol. 36, pp. 374-380

Pfeifer-Schaupp, Hans-Ulrich (Hrsg.), Systemische Praxis. Modelle – Konzepte – Perspektiven.[Systemic Practice. Models – Concepts – Perspectives] ,Freiburg 2002 (Lambertus)

Pfeifer-Schaupp, Hans-Ulrich, Jenseits der Familientherapie. Systemische Konzepte in der sozialen Arbeit [Beyond family therapy. Systemic concepts in social work], Freiburg 1995 (Lambertus)

Ritscher, Wolf (2002), Systemische Modelle für Sozialarbeit und Therapie. Ein integratives Lehrbuch für Theorie und Praxis; Heidelberg [Systemic models for social work and therapy. An integrative textbook for theory and practice]; Carl-Auer Verlag

Ritscher, Wolf (2007), Soziale Arbeit: systemisch. Ein Konzept und seine Anwendung [Social work: systemic. A concept and its application]; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

## Systemic Solution-Oriented Social Work in Switzerland

Käthi Vöggtli & Irene Müller / Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – Social Work

### **Abstract**

*This article describes systemic solution-oriented social work in Switzerland. It contains general information on practical experience and education. Social institutions often prefer a systemic solution-oriented approach, whereby different theoretical and methodological schools of thought are also mixed together. Systemic approaches are taught in every school for social work, which have developed into universities of applied sciences only in the last twenty years. A brief introduction is also provided for the Systemistic Paradigm, a non-constructivist systemic approach that was developed at the Zürcher Fachhochschule. The focus is on systemic orientations and topics at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts - Social Work, where a Master's degree program, Master of Advanced Studies, has been offered in solution- and competency orientation for the last 13 years. The evolution from a classic systemic approach, as taught in the 1970's and 80's, to a constructivist-solution-oriented perspective, a "doing to" to a "doing with", is described. Some of the main topics are: the concept of "Kundigkeit" of the client (according to Jürgen Hargens), the idea that clients are experts on their own lives, the importance of distinguishing between the expertise of knowing and the expertise of not knowing for professionals. The change in teaching accompanying this development is also discussed. Particular focus is given to key aspects of working with clients in mandated relationships: The observation of cooperation approaches (instruction, guidance, counseling), the modes of interaction (customer, complainer, visitor) and the positioning of the professional. The generic principles of a self-organizing change process are also briefly introduced. The article concludes with two practical examples.*

---

*Dieser Artikel beschreibt lösungsorientierte systemische Sozialarbeit in der Schweiz. Er beinhaltet allgemeine Informationen über praktische Erfahrungen und Ausbildung. Soziale Einrichtungen bevorzugen oft systemisch-lösungsorientierte Ansätze, in denen theoretische und methodische Schulen vermischt werden. Systemische Ansätze werden heute in jeder Ausbildung für Sozialarbeit gelehrt. Dem systemistischen Paradigma, einem nicht- konstruktivistischen systemischen Ansatz der Zürcher Fachhochschule, wird eine kurze Einleitung gewidmet. Der Schwerpunkt liegt auf systemischen Orientierungen und Inhalten der FH Luzern, die seit 13 Jahren einen Masterstudiengang sowie einen Master of Advanced Studies in Lösungs- und Kompetenzorientierung anbieten. Die Entwicklung von den klassischen systemischen Ansätzen der 70er und 80er Jahre zu einer konstruktivistisch-lösungsorientierten Perspektive wird beschrieben. Einige der Hauptinhalte sind: das Konzept der "Kundigkeit" der Klient/innen (Jürgen Hargens), die Vorstellung, dass Klienten Expert/innen für ihr eigenes Leben sind, die Wichtigkeit, dass Professionelle zwischen der Expertise des Wissens und jener des Nicht-Wissens unterscheiden können. Veränderungen, die diese Entwicklungen für das Unterrichten bedeuten, werden ebenso diskutiert wie Schlüsselaspekte der Klientenarbeit in Zwangskontexten: die Beobachtung der Kooperationsform (Anweisung, Anleitung,*

*Beratung) sowie der Beraterin-Klient-Beziehung (Kund/innen, Klagende, Besuchende). Nach einer kurzen Vorstellung der generischen Prinzipien schließt der Artikel mit zwei Praxisbeispielen.*

## **Introduction**

“When someone makes a journey, he has some tales to tell.”<sup>12</sup> This famous quote from the poet Matthi as Claudius comes to mind when we look at Switzerland after one and a half years of participation in the STEP project. Whereby this quote would need to be changed slightly to reflect the fact that after travelling in various European countries we now see our own country, Switzerland, with different eyes, because we have a new basis for comparison. After a “look over the garden fence”<sup>13</sup> you also see your own garden differently. This is the outstanding benefit of traveling: it changes how we look at ourselves, which already puts us right into a systemic way of thinking.

## **General Information on Practical Experience and Education**

Much like in Germany, the family therapy concepts from the USA and Italy spread in Switzerland during the 1970's and 1980's. Social workers only had two options for completing a so-called higher education: supervision or family therapy. At that time, social workers could apply for a therapy license, which is no longer possible today.

In the last 20 years in every part of Switzerland, the German, French and Italian speaking parts, the educational institutions for social work have developed into universities of applied sciences<sup>14</sup> and thus a wealth of educational opportunities has emerged.<sup>15</sup> Many certificate and master's degree programs related to specific functions, fields of work or target groups of social work, such as case management, non-voluntary and mandated clients, and unemployment. The theories, concepts and methodological tools imparted in such programs are often composed of different schools of thought. They frequently include systemic and solution-oriented theories. In addition, there are entire courses that exclusively

---

<sup>12</sup> Matthias Claudius (German poet, 1740-1815). Urians Reise um die Welt.

<sup>13</sup> Vöggtli Käthi (2013). Systemische Sozialarbeit in Europa – ein Blick über den Gartenzaun. In: Zwischen Schutz und Selbstbestimmung. Commemorative publication for the 70th birthday of Prof. Christoph Häfeli. Bern: Stämpfli.

<sup>14</sup> For more information see: Müller Irene, Vöggtli Käthi (2011). 1000 words about Swiss Systemic Social Work. Working paper STEP-Project. <http://www.asys.ac.at/step/substance/38-basics/75-switzerland-hochschule-luzern-1000-words-about-swiss-systemic-social-work.html> (Apr. 1st, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> In the Swiss landscape of universities of applied sciences for social work, there are three MA, Master of Arts in Social Work programs from which graduates may continue on for a doctoral degree. Two of these are offered in German speaking part of Switzerland, and the third is at a French-language university. This program is offered in cooperation with the Italian-speaking university.

<http://www.hslu.ch/sozialarbeit/s-ausbildung/s-master-sozialer-arbeit.htm>

<http://www.fhnw.ch/sozialarbeit/bachelor-und-master/masterstudium/master-of-arts-in-sozialer-arbeit-mit-schwerpunkt-soziale-innovation>

<http://www.hes-so.ch/fr/master-travail-social-mats.html?theme=T13>

<http://www.supsi.ch/dsas.html> (Jan. 31st, 2013)

All the other Master's programs, of which there are plenty, are MAS, Master of Advanced Studies programs. Systemic theories are taught throughout Switzerland, however, the German speaking part of Switzerland is mainly influenced by the U.S. and Germany, and the French speaking part of Switzerland is mainly influenced by Canada and France. In the Italian speaking part of Switzerland, Italian theories and concepts may be more recognized.

teach systemic and particularly solution-oriented theories, concepts and tools and support the learners in implementing what they have learned in different fields of work and functions. These programs have enjoyed high demand for over a decade.

When looking at models and concepts of organizations in social work or in employment advertisements, terms such as “systemic”, “solution-oriented” and “resource-oriented” are ubiquitous<sup>16</sup>. We are familiar with organizations that have implemented a strict systemic solution-oriented approach like we saw in Hackney from Swiss organizations for inpatient child and youth services that have done the same (see Chapter 4 Examples). In outpatient social work we know of many organizations in which a systemic solution-oriented approach is required and many of the staff are trained in this approach and creatively implement it in their actual work. Yet we would like to see more organizations in which these approaches are consistently realized in the management of the organization, in the working relationship with the employees, and in the cooperation with other organizations.

An example of an institutionalized cooperation between very different systems of the social safety net is the so-called IIZ, the Interinstitutionelle Zusammenarbeit (Inter-Institutional Cooperation). Here, representatives from three major social insurance institutions, disability insurance, unemployment insurance and welfare, regularly meet to discuss the situations of specific individuals and develop solutions. The idea is that this should help keep clients from being “pushed” from one insurance institution to the other. Depending on the viewpoint, and depending on how the task is perceived by the specialists, more or less systemic solution-oriented instruments are used.

As in other countries, different theories, concepts and tools are also found under the name of “systemic” in Switzerland. Roughly speaking, one can say that systemic solution-oriented concepts have been widespread in social work for the last 10 to 15 years. Constructivist theories and the basic assumptions and instruments of the solution-oriented approach are taught in varying degrees at colleges, in bachelor’s courses and/or in further education.<sup>17</sup> Another widespread theoretical principle is Luhmann’s systems theory<sup>18</sup>.

At the Zurich School of Applied Sciences - Social Work, a systems theory was developed over decades, particularly by Werner Obrecht and Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, that today is well known even in Germany and Austria under the term “Systemistic Paradigm”. Based on the emergentist systemism of the Argentine-Canadian scientist Mario Bunge<sup>19</sup> as a metatheory, Obrecht constructed a paradigm

---

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.avenirsocial.ch/de/stellen.cfm> (Jan. 1st, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> For more information see: Müller Irene & Vöggtli Käthi (2011). 1000 words about Swiss Systemic Social Work. Arbeitspapier STEP-Projekt. <http://www.asys.ac.at/step/substance/38-basics/75-switzerland-hochschule-luzern-1000-words-about-swiss-systemic-social-work.html> (April 1st, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> cf.: Kleve Heiko (2009). *Konstruktivismus und Soziale Arbeit. Einführung in Grundlagen der systemisch-konstruktivistischen Theorie und Praxis*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

<sup>19</sup> Borrmann Stefan, Klassen Michael & Spatschek Christian (2010): *Das Systemistische Paradigma der Sozialen Arbeit*. In: Krieger Wolfgang (ed.). *Systemische Impulse. Theorieansätze, neue Konzepte und Anwendungsfelder systemischer Sozialer Arbeit*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag. p. 116.

for a science of social work that combined the object theories (e.g. psychology, sociology, etc.), general action theories and special action theories (methods) with “reality” (types of concrete systems), or in other words with social work in practice<sup>20</sup>. A major concern of Obrecht and Staub-Bernasconi is “to obtain scientifically based intervention knowledge for handling social problems.” In this way “social work also [gains] a little more autonomy from problem definitions and action orders that are brought from other social groups of actors.”<sup>21</sup> The Systemic Paradigm is a non-constructivist approach and is therefore in contrast to the other systems theory approaches that have decisively influenced social work over the past twenty years. Staub-Bernasconi “among other things expounded on the problems of the supposed ‘power blindness’ of the systemic-constructivist perspective of social work.”<sup>22</sup>

Well known and widely seen as part of the described theory is the “Systemic Figure of Thought” from Staub-Bernasconi. Klaus Wögerer<sup>23</sup>, a colleague from Austria, compared the systemic figure of thought, or the “Zurich School”, with the systemic theory of the “Vienna School” and called for their compatibility.

## ***Systemic Orientations and Topics***

### ***at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – Social Work***

#### **General**

The Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – Social Work is a department of the University of Applied Sciences of Central Switzerland and was created through the merger of three small schools in the mid-1990’s. Two schools provided an education in social work and the third in socio-cultural animation (formerly youth work). One of the schools for social work already brought with it a long tradition of systemic thinking and action, particularly in working with families. The other focused more on the Systemic Paradigm mentioned above. These two schools of thought can still be seen today and continue to develop further, with the systemic school focusing more on action theory in the systemic figure of thought, and the systemic-constructivist solution-oriented school focusing more on communication skills and counseling methods.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 115

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 131

<sup>22</sup> Kleve Heiko (2011). Vom Erweitern der Möglichkeiten. In: Pörksen Bernhard (ed.). Schlüsselwerke des Konstruktivismus. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. p. 509

<sup>23</sup> Wögerer Klaus (2010). Systemische Denkfigur (“Züricher Schule”) und/oder systemische Theorie der “Wiener Schule”? In BASYS, Berichte des Arbeitskreises für Systemische Sozialarbeit, Beratung und Supervision, No. 29; Issue 2/2010, pp. 4-23

<sup>24</sup> This consulting methodology was theoretically and especially practically summarized in 2003 in: Weber Esther (2012<sup>3</sup>). Beratungsmethodik in der Sozialen Arbeit. Das Unterrichtskonzept der Beratungsmethodik an der Hochschule Luzern – Soziale Arbeit. 3rd, revised edition. Luzern: interact Verlag.

## Orientation and Subjects in the MAS Solution- and Competence Orientation

So what are the central aspects of the systemic solution-oriented approach for us in the MAS Solution- and Competence Orientation? We try to select a few each year with the knowledge that they can only provide a broad overview. Looking back, we are reminded once again just how dominate communication theory (P. Watzlawick et al.) and the principles and models from family therapy (e.g. Minuchin, Haley, Satir, Selvini-Palazzoli and others) were until the early 1990's and how they were adapted to social work contexts. Drawing from this pool of knowledge, the fundamental ideas of systems theory are still taught:

- Origin, development of systems theory(ies)
- What is a (social) system?
- Communication behavior as a characteristic of system elements
- Networking and circularity

The encounter with constructivist theories and the derived assumptions and practices revolutionized the systemic work for us and also the form of teaching. Influential authors were Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela with their concept of autopoiesis.<sup>25</sup> The idea that we can not change something specific from the outside with “interventions”, but at the most create an impetus or a distraction that perhaps supports a change possibly in the desired direction changed the previous concepts of systemic work. We came across an expression in Hackney London that we feel is very appropriate for this transition when referring to a shift from a “doing to” to a “doing with”. This “doing with” permeates and changes all actions. It changes the language, ideas and the approach to clients, colleagues and also students. Here are some key orientations:

### Kundigkeit (Client, Expert, Scout)

In the mid-1990's, it was Jürgen Hargens' “Konzept der Kundigkeit”<sup>26</sup> in particular that inspired us and changed our perspective. Against a background of radical constructivism, he supported the belief that if “a person is generally not capable of directly and immediately recognizing a ‘reality out there’,” diagnoses are not what provide us as professionals of a “helping action” with privileged access to the reality constructions of our clients.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Maturana Humberto R. & Varela Francisco J. (1987). *Der Baum der Erkenntnis. Wie wir die Welt durch unsere Wahrnehmung erschaffen –die biologischen Wurzeln des menschlichen Erkennens.* Bern, Munich, Vienna: Scherz.

<sup>26</sup> Hargens Jürgen (1993, 2004). *Kundin, Kundige, Kundschafterin. Gedanken zur Grundlegung eines “helfenden” Zugangs.* In: *Aller Anfang ist ein Anfang. Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten hilfreicher systemischer Gespräche.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. pp. 142 – 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144f.

## Clients as Experts on Their Own Life

This principle, as presented by Walter & Peller<sup>28</sup> in their twelve basic assumptions of a solution-oriented approach, is extremely important for us and fundamentally how we work together with clients. It is the fundamental belief that the dialogue partner is always an expert on their own life and for which solutions best fit their own living environment. This reflects theories from constructivism and autopoiesis. This is of course not an absolute truth, but rather a perspective, an assumption that increases the options for the dialogue partner and raises the likelihood of a suitable solution. Therefore we have developed an image to illustrate this position, the:

### Dialogue on the Bridge

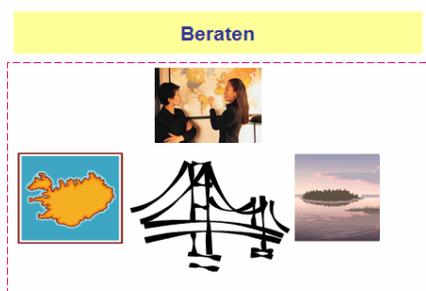


Figure 1: K. Vögtli, teaching material

The social worker and her dialogue partner each represent their own unique country. Their dialogue takes place on a bridge that is not attached to either of the two countries; it is not possible to go from one country to the other. On the bridge, the conversation is about the partner's country, i.e. the client's country. She is a client, she is an expert on her own country (much more than we could ever be!), and through the questions we ask her, she becomes a scout in her own country. She might discover paths that she was not aware of (anymore), or others that she has not yet dared to take. We owe the term "scout" to Hargens, who in turn owes it to a group of Hungarian family therapists<sup>29</sup>.

### Expertise of Not-Knowing / Expertise of Knowing

In a constructivist-solution-oriented-systemic approach, as we teach and practice it in Lucerne, "not-knowing" holds a central position and is not to be confused with "knowing nothing". It is a conscious positioning: "The many ideas and hypotheses that go through our minds during a conversation are no longer guiding factors. Much more we practice 'freeing' our minds and creating space to receive the thought processes of the dialogue partner and to contribute to their development. The resources for

<sup>28</sup> Walter John L. & Peller Jane E. (2004). Lösungs-orientierte Kurztherapie. Ein Lehr- und Lernbuch. Dortmund: verlag modernes lernen.

<sup>29</sup> Hargens Jürgen (1993, 2004). Kundin, Kundige, Kundschafterin. Gedanken zur Grundlegung eines "helfenden" Zugangs. In: Aller Anfang ist ein Anfang. Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten hilfreicher systemischer Gespräche. p. 152. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

solutions are hidden in this development.”<sup>30</sup>This item refers to the contents of a conversation, while we are indeed experts for controlling the process and for professional and field-specific knowledge.

Marianne Roessler and Wolfgang Gaiswinkler speak of a “communicative expertise that can be referred to as ‘expertise of not-knowing’,” in which the social workers “assume in conversations that people always have good reasons subjectively in their frame of reference for how they behave. [...]” This expertise “comes on the one hand from the attitude and perception (personal frame theory) for leading counseling sessions and from the form of the professional relationship with the client, and on the other hand from the specific interview techniques and tools.”<sup>31</sup>

The combination of “not-knowing” and “knowledge” has become very important to us because it enables both institutional services and conditions in social work to be recognized and taken into consideration, as well as the integration of fundamental and, based on experience, often very beneficial attitudes with the instruments of a solution-focused approach in professional contact with clients.

### Teaching is Also Changing Radically

To design an educational program with a systemic-constructivist solution-oriented approach for professionals in social work who bring a great deal of work experience with them, and to impart the relevant theoretical principles, attitudes and instruments, was and continues to be an exciting and enriching experience. The basic ideas, in particular the fundamental attitudes, should also be practiced in the work together with the students: The dialogue partner is an expert regarding themselves, on their learning process, on their practical experience, it is about “doing what you teach”, about providing plenty of time to practice and learn. The effect of attitudes and instruments must be able to be experienced. Then it is possible on a very different level to successfully apply them to your own practical work and adapt them to the different contexts.<sup>32</sup>

### Particularly Important for Social Work<sup>33</sup>

When applying counseling approaches from therapies in social work, a few dimensions are of particular importance. It was and is a special concern of ours to educate professionals who remain in

---

<sup>30</sup> Pfister-Wiederkehr Daniel, Vöggtli Käthi (2003). Position des Nicht-Wissens. Werkzeugkiste des Lösungs- und kompetenzorientierten Handelns. CD-Rom. Hochschule Luzern – Soziale Arbeit: interact Verlag.

<sup>31</sup> Roessler Marianne, Gaiswinkler Wolfgang (2007). Empowerment konkret? Wie SozialarbeiterInnen in ihrem Alltag KlientInnen bei der Selbstermächtigung unterstützen und zugleich ihren institutionellen Auftrag erfüllen – Anregungen durch den systemisch lösungsfokussierten Ansatz nach Steve de Shazer und Insoo Kim Berg. In: EntwicklungspartnerInnenschaft Donau – Quality in Inclusion (Hg.). Sozialer Sektor im Wandel. Zur Qualitätsdebatte und Beauftragung von Sozialer Arbeit. p. 286. Linz: edition pro mente.

<sup>32</sup> Vöggtli Käthi (2003). Nicht-wissen(d) lehren. Ein Ausbildungsprozess – konstruktivistisch gerahmt. In: Hargens Jürgen (ed.). “...und mir hat geholfen...”. Psychotherapeutische Arbeit – was wirkt? Perspektiven und Geschichten der Beteiligten. Dortmund: borgmann. pp. 191-216.

<sup>33</sup> Mehr dazu in: Pfister-Wiederkehr Daniel, Vöggtli Käthi (2003). Unfreiwillige Klienten/innen. Werkzeugkiste des Lösungs- und kompetenzorientierten Handelns. CD-Rom. Hochschule Luzern – Soziale Arbeit: interact Verlag.

the fields of social work and who with their newly expanded knowledge and skills perform good work and remain healthy. We pay special attention to:

### *Spheres of Cooperation*

In keeping with Kurt Ludewig<sup>34</sup>, for cooperation between professionals and clients we distinguish between the four basic types: instruction, guidance, counseling and treatment.<sup>35</sup> We have experienced again and again just how important these distinctions are. The basic attitudes during contact with the clients remains the same, they define what we like to call the contact quality. However, it is very important to be aware of the context in which we work. Is it about counseling, changing a situation, or our own behavior? Is it about dealing with a situation together with your dialogue partner (e.g. getting a financial situation under control) or is it about the guidance and support in a challenging life situation? Johannes Herwig-Lempp and Ludger Kühling even distinguish between six forms of cooperation: advice - negotiate - intervene - represent - provide - be there<sup>36</sup>. It is about ensuring that the instruments chosen fit the context, the form of cooperation, to enable their effects to develop.

### *Modes of Interaction*

Also of key importance is the recognition of the so-called mode of interaction, or the relationship pattern<sup>37</sup> as Steve de Shazer calls it, which people follow when they interact with us and which can change with each interaction. Is the dialogue partner a “customer”, someone who wants to work on solving a problem and is seeking support?

Are they “a complainer, a seeker”, someone who is suffering from a particular situation but sees other people or the circumstances as the cause? Or are we engaged in a mode of interaction which is often typical for social work, at least when first making contact, namely that of the “visitor”? They have been sent by someone or they have to come because of their financial situation, but actually they want nothing to do with us. Once again, it is crucial to distinguish the relationship patterns to ensure the suitability of the chosen instruments, and in the solution-oriented approach, also for selecting appropriate tasks.

### *Mandated Relationships*

We place particular importance on the professional interaction with “visitors”, with “mandated relationships”. Contact with so-called “non-voluntary clients” is often seen as a particularly difficult and stressful experience. This is due to the fact that social workers feel responsible for achieving goals

---

<sup>34</sup> Ludewig Kurt (1997<sup>4</sup>). Systemische Therapie. pp. 121-126. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

<sup>35</sup> Whereby the dimension “Therapy” is no longer followed.

<sup>36</sup> Herwig-Lempp J. & Kühling L. (2012). Sozialarbeit ist anspruchsvoller als Therapie. In Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung, April 30th, 2012, No. 2, p. 53. Dortmund: modernes lernen.

<sup>37</sup> De Shazer Steve (2004). Der Dreh. Überraschende Wendungen und Lösungen in der Kurzzeittherapie. pp. 102-106. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag.

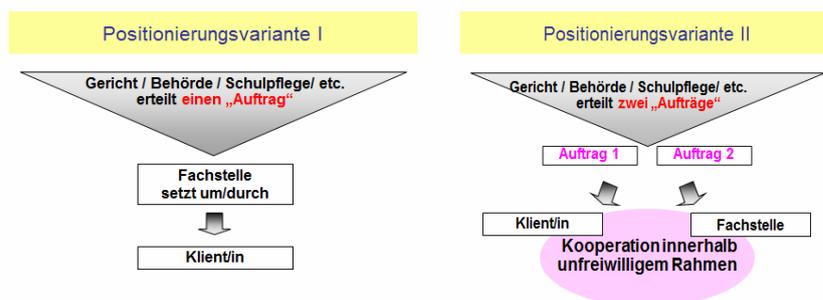
and overlook the fact that the power to change lies in the hands of the client. Which of course does not mean that professionals are not able to contribute to a change, they are very much in a position to do so. However, distinguishing who is responsible for what, the professionals for the process, the client for the content, as described in the sections “Kundigkeit” or “Clients as Experts”, is often enough to drastically reduce the stress involved with such contact. We have also introduced a further distinction that has proven to be very helpful in practice. We distinguish between the task for the client:

→to change something

and the task of the social worker:

→to support this change professionally.

If, as in the diagram of the first positioning model, only *one* task is seen, namely that of the professional, you will often have the negative feeling of having to put up with the “disgruntled” client when working together, and in addition, as already mentioned, will feel responsible for something that you can not accomplish directly. However, if you now see it as being divided into *two* tasks, as is shown in the second diagram, then the negative feelings will be directed more towards those who mandated the contact. Within this mandated framework, the social worker and the client can then negotiate goals between them.



Figures 2 and 3: Pfister-Wiederkehr Daniel, teaching materials<sup>38</sup>

The following quote from a graduate shows the effect of this perspective:

“Solution-orientation in a mandated context in my daily professional life means:

- Thinking of good reasons for difficult to understand behavior,
- Talking to the clients about the consequences of their actions,
- Discussing the freedom of choice and goals within the given framework
- And reminding myself over and over that sustainable changes in behavior can not be forced, but only come about through the decisions of the clients”.

— Stefan Wilhelmus, graduate MAS Solution- and Competence Orientation – Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts – Social Work.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> I would like to thank my colleague Daniel Pfister-Wiederkehr for allowing me to use his teaching materials.

<sup>39</sup> Brochures MAS Solution- and Competence Orientation- [http://weiterbildung.hslu.ch/soziale-arbeit/kurs.asp?kid=2381&m=10&page\\_no=1&tid=&search=L%F6sung%2D+und+Kompetenzorientierung&sort=0](http://weiterbildung.hslu.ch/soziale-arbeit/kurs.asp?kid=2381&m=10&page_no=1&tid=&search=L%F6sung%2D+und+Kompetenzorientierung&sort=0) (Feb. 9th, 2013).

## Synergetics, Self-Organization and Generic Principles

To conclude this chapter, we would like to introduce one more principle that has become important to us in recent years. It helps us to align our own professional action as closely as possible with the self-organizing, autopoietic process of our dialogue partner. Günter Schiepek et al. argue that the term “synergetics”, which comes from Greek, means “models of cybernetic interactions”. It stands for today’s “most elaborated theory of self-organizing processes that are available to us across all disciplines.”<sup>40</sup> Change takes place accordingly “in the form of diverse and multi-layer order-order transitions” and psychotherapy, or in our case social work, can be seen as “creating conditions for the possibility” of being interpreted by order transitions. The relevant conditions and process characteristics can be summarized in eight generic principles. These include the requirements for self-organized order transitions between cognitive-emotional behaviors.<sup>41</sup>

Among others, Schiepek also worked closely with de Shazer. He considers the solution focus a very useful approach for supporting self-organizing change processes. However, he also emphasizes the usefulness of the combination of approaches and instruments with regard to the work in different fields. In our view, this is a major strength of these principles: we can use them to align our own actions or to reflect on processes, and we can also use them to question the way in which very different approaches and instruments serve which principles. Thus, they enable a new kind of dialogue between different methods that otherwise quickly lead to competition or even hostility. The eight principles are:<sup>42</sup>

1. Create conditions of stability: Implement measures to generate structural and emotional security, trust and self-esteem
2. Identify patterns in the system: identify the relevant system in which related changes are to be made (e.g., individual or group / organization); describe patterns / system processes (if necessary)
3. Establish meaning: clarify the meaningful classification and evaluation of the change process through the dialogue partner

---

<sup>40</sup> Schiepek Günter, Ludwig-Becker Friederike, Helde Andrea, Jagdfeld Frank, Petzold Ernst R., Kröger Friedebert (2000). Synergetik für die Praxis. Therapie als Anregung selbstorganisierender Prozesse. In: System Familie 13, p. 169. Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 173-175.

Author’s note regarding the term “order-order transition”: in physics, the transition of water from liquid into steam by heating is an example of an order-order transition. In contrast, G. Schiepek holds that human systems can never be moved to an order-order transition by the direct input of energy from an external source, but rather that the energy has to be generated through the self-organization of the system. This in turn can be stimulated by observing the generic principles, without us being able to know in advance if and in which direction the system will move.

<sup>42</sup> Schiepek Günter (2008). Psychotherapie als evidenzbasiertes Prozessmanagement. Ein Beitrag zur Professionalisierung jenseits des Standardmodells. In: Nervenheilkunde 12/2008, pp. 1138-1146. Stuttgart: Schattauer GmbH.

4. Energize: activate motivation and resources related to the goals of the dialogue partner
5. Destabilize / Reinforce fluctuation: Behavioral experiments, pattern interrupts, distinctions and differentiations
6. Observe “Kairos”<sup>43</sup> / Enable resonance and synchronization: schedule and coordinate therapeutic approaches and communication styles with the psychological and social processes / rhythms of the dialogue partner
7. Prepare specific symmetry breaks: goal orientation, anticipation and planned implementation of structural elements of the new state of order, try new behaviors that move in the desired direction
8. Re-stabilize: implement measures for the stabilization and integration of new cognitive-emotional behavior.

### ***Examples of a Systemic Approach in Switzerland***

#### **Schul- und Wohnzentrum (School and Residential Centre)**

The Schul- und Wohnzentrum (SWZ) with its main location in Malters-Schachen near Lucerne<sup>44</sup> is an inpatient child and youth services organization that has consistently applied a systemic solution-oriented approach since the 1990's. SWZ stands out in that the corresponding attitudes and instruments are implemented at all levels of the organization:

- In their work directly with the children and youth and their families. They are the experts for defining the goals, the focus is on resources and potential, “good reasons” control their behavior. The children should only stay with the organization as long as necessary and as short as possible.
- In their cooperation with the child protection organizations and with the teachers of the children and youth. With everyone who is involved in the children and youth coming to SWZ.

This may all seem completely obvious up to this point. However, as we look deeper we see that SWZ takes this approach much further. The cooperation within the institution is governed by the same principles:

---

<sup>43</sup> “Kairos” = the good moment, the right moment

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.swz.ch/> (06.02.2013).

- The mission statement<sup>45</sup> is formulated accordingly. Everything they do is always governed by one central question: What is of benefit to the child or youth? All decisions are made with this question in mind.
- The quality management reflects a partnership-style through the use of internal and external Q-teams that work in the style of a reflecting team.<sup>46</sup>
- The organization's development goals are determined in a participatory manner and set for a two-year period with an annual review.
- The organization takes great care to conduct the staff reviews as development discussions in a goal and solution-oriented manner.<sup>47/48</sup>
- Employees are required to have the appropriate training, or as part of their employment contract they are obligated to complete such training, which to an extent is offered internally.
- The institution is supported by a foundation and largely subsidized by the State. Even the cooperation with the members of the Board, who gave the order to implement a systemic solution-oriented approach, acts in accordance with appropriate guiding principles.<sup>49</sup>

At the level of the organization's development, this approach to dealing with new issues raises new "problems". The response to these challenges is new projects, the regular search for new paths, for solutions. Thus, in recent years for example, day care spaces were created or teams were formed to advise and support the case manager, teachers and families in the communities. This means that a stay at the institute can be avoided.

An outstanding innovation was implemented in August 2012: SWZ made a fundamental change to the structure of its main location, which previously consisted of residential units, managed by social workers, and a school with teachers. Now, transdisciplinary teams of social workers and teachers work together and are jointly responsible for fostering the personal and academic growth of the children and youth at the institution. This means that there are now significantly more opportunities for individually tailored, targeted support for the individual children.

---

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.swz.ch/files/pdf/swz/leitbild.pdf> (06.02.2013).

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.swz.ch/files/pdf/swz/qm/auditkonzept.pdf> (06.02.2013).

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.swz.ch/files/pdf/swz/fuehren-mit-zielen/fuehren-mit-zielen-raster.pdf> (06.02.2013).

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.swz.ch/files/pdf/swz/fuehren-mit-zielen/fuehren-mit-zielen-qualifikation.pdf> (06.02.2013).

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.swz.ch/files/pdf/swz/traegerschaft/sr-leitbild.pdf> (06.02.2013).

## **ElternLehre**

ElternLehre®50 emerged from the thesis of a graduate of the MAS Solution- and Competence Orientation. It is a range of courses, and in the meantime also a book<sup>51</sup>, for parents of babies and toddlers. The author, Marlies Bieri, writes: “Today's society is characterized by a growing diversity of value orientations and lifestyles. This has resulted in parents no longer being fully aware of their strengths, especially in challenging situations, and feeling the need for support. ElternLehre takes on the big and small questions of the parents. It is based on development and relationship behavior and reflects the parent's own parenting style. Mothers and fathers are encouraged to develop their own sense of what is good for them and their children. Parents are experts on their parenting.

As an adult educator, the author has combined her knowledge and skills from the MAS Solution- and Competence Orientation with her didactic know-how to develop a range of courses to on the one hand provide parents with knowledge, based on the fit concept from the Swiss pediatrician Remo H. Largo, and on the other hand to help them develop their own appropriate forms of parenting through exercises, exchanging experiences and reflection.

ElternLehre was launched in the canton of Bern in 2007. The courses are supported financially by the Department of Education of the Canton Bern and the private sector. Pediatricians recommend, Social Services recommend or mandate attending ElternLehre. The course lasts one and a half years and is held once a month. Participants are parents from different social and cultural backgrounds.

## **Further Organizations**

Suchtfachklinik Selhofen, Burgdorf - <http://www.klinikselhofen.ch/> - (addiction clinic) (Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Espace libre, Biel - FamilienCoaching - Sozialpädagogische Familienbegleitung - <http://www.familiencoaching-biel.ch/de/p/familiencoaching/familiencoaching.php> - (family counseling) (Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Auboden, Brunnadern - Ausbildungsstätte für Jugendliche mit Lernschwierigkeiten, leichten Körperbehinderungen sowie psychosozialen Beeinträchtigungen - <http://www.auboden.ch/> - (training center for challenged youth) (Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Kinder- und Jugenddienst Basel - <http://www.ed-bs.ch/jfs/netzwerk-kindesschutz/anlaufstellen/akjs-abteilung-kindes-und-jugendschutz> - (child and youth services) (Feb. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

## **References**

Bamberger Günter G. (2005). Lösungsorientierte Beratung. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Verlag. 3<sup>rd</sup> completely revised edition.

---

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.elternlehre.ch/> (06.02.2013).

<sup>51</sup> Bieri Marlies (2012). ElternLehre®. Baby – Kleinkind. Oberhofen am Thunersee: Zytglogge.

De Shazer Steve (2004<sup>8</sup>). Der Dreh. Überraschende Wendungen und Lösungen in der Kurzzeittherapie. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag.

De Shazer Steve (2010<sup>2</sup>). Worte waren ursprünglich Zauber. Von der Problemsprache zur Lösungssprache. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer Verlag.

Hargens Jürgen (2004). Aller Anfang ist ein Anfang. Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten hilfreicher systemischer Gespräche. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Herwig-Lempp Johannes & Kühling Ludger (2012). Sozialarbeit ist anspruchsvoller als Therapie. In: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie und Beratung, yr. April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012, No. 2, p. 53. Dortmund: modernes lernen.

Krieger Wolfgang (ed.). Systemische Impulse. Theorieansätze, neue Konzepte und Anwendungsfelder systemischer Sozialer Arbeit. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.

Kleve Heiko (2009<sup>3</sup>). Konstruktivismus und Soziale Arbeit. Einführung in Grundlagen der systemisch-konstruktivistischen Theorie und Praxis. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Maturana Humberto R. & Varela Francisco J. (1987). Der Baum der Erkenntnis. Wie wir die Welt durch unsere Wahrnehmung erschaffen – die biologischen Wurzeln des menschlichen Erkennens. Bern, Munich, Vienna: Scherz.

Pfister-Wiederkehr Daniel, Vögeli Käthi (2003). Werkzeugkiste des Lösungs- und kompetenzorientierten Handelns. CD-Rom for PC and Mac. Hochschule Luzern – Soziale Arbeit: interact Verlag.

Pörksen Bernhard (ed.). Schlüsselwerke des Konstruktivismus. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Roessler Marianne, Gaiswinkler Wolfgang (2007). Empowerment konkret? Wie SozialarbeiterInnen in ihrem Alltag KlientInnen bei der Selbstermächtigung unterstützen und zugleich ihren institutionellen Auftrag erfüllen – Anregungen durch den systemisch lösungsfokussierten Ansatz nach Steve de Shazer und Insoo Kim Berg. In: EntwicklungspartnerInnenschaft Donau – Quality in Inclusion (ed.). Sozialer Sektor im Wandel. Zur Qualitätsdebatte und Beauftragung von Sozialer Arbeit. Linz: edition pro mente

Roessler, Marianne & Gaiswinkler, Wolfgang (2009). Using the expertise of knowing and the expertise of not-knowing to support processes of empowerment in social work practice. Journal of social work practice, pp. 215 – 227.

Schiepek Günter, Ludwig-Becker Friederike, Helde Andrea, Jagdfeld Frank, Petzold Ernst R., Kröger Friedebert (2000). Synergetik für die Praxis. Therapie als Anregung selbstorganisierender Prozesse. In System Familie 13, pp. 169 – 177. Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.

Schiepek Günter (2008). Psychotherapie als evidenzbasiertes Prozessmanagement. Ein Beitrag zur Professionalisierung jenseits des Standardmodells. In: Nervenheilkunde 12/2008. pp. 1138-1146. Stuttgart: Schattauer GmbH.

Schiepek, Günter (2008). Psychotherapie as Evidence-Based Process Management: A contribution to Professionalism Beyond the Standard Model. *Kairos* 2, 1-2, pp. 7 – 22.

Vögtli Käthi (2003). Nicht-wissen(d) lehren. Ein Ausbildungsprozess – konstruktivistisch gerahmt. In: Hargens Jürgen (ed.). "...und mir hat geholfen...". Psychotherapeutische Arbeit – was wirkt? Perspektiven und Geschichten der Beteiligten. pp. 191-216. Dortmund: borgmann.

Vögtli Käthi (Mai 2013). Systemische Sozialarbeit in Europa – ein Blick über den Gartenzaun. In: Zwischen Schutz und Selbstbestimmung. Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Prof. Christoph Häfeli. Bern: Stämpfli Verlag.

Walter John L. & Peller Jane E. (2004). Lösungs-orientierte Kurztherapie. Ein Lehr- und Lernbuch. Dortmund: verlag modernes lernen.

Weber Esther (2012<sup>3</sup>). Beratungsmethodik in der Sozialen Arbeit. Das Unterrichtskonzept der Beratungsmethodik an der Hochschule Luzern – Soziale Arbeit. Third, revised edition. Luzern: interact Verlag.

Wögerer Klaus (2010). Systemische Denkfigur („Züricher Schule“) und/oder systemische Theorie der „Wiener Schule“? In BASYS, Berichte des Arbeitskreises für Systemische Sozialarbeit, Beratung und Supervision, No. 29; Issue 2/2010

## An Investigation into the Systemic Approach

Bernhard Lehr, FH Campus Wien

### **Abstract**

*Through the STEP Project, the author was given particular insight into systemic thinking and the practice of systemic social work. Both while teaching as a lecturer on the BA degree program at the FH Campus Wien, as well as when dealing with clients as a social worker, it is equally important to “provide insight and receive insight”. Based on the term “insight”, the text aims to convey the author’s personal point of view as regards his primary understanding of systemic thinking in social work. Linked to this, the way that he gives his students insight into systemic thinking as part of a course of seminars is also described. Finally, the topic of visualizing communication cycles is presented, with particular reference to the method of “Sesselsculpting”.*

---

*Durch das STEP Projekt erhielt der Autor spezielle Einblicke in systemisches Denken und Praxis von systemischer Sozialarbeit. Sowohl als Lektor am BA Studiengang der FH Campus Wien beim Unterrichten aber auch als Sozialarbeiter im Umgang mit KlientInnen geht es ebenfalls um das Thema „Einblick geben und Einblick erhalten“. Ausgehend vom Begriff „Einblick“ soll im Text die persönliche Sichtweise des Autors über sein prinzipielles Verständnis von systemischem Denken in der Sozialarbeit vermittelt werden. Verbunden damit aber auch seine Art und Weise, wie er Studierenden Einblick in das systemische Denken im Rahmen einer Lehrveranstaltung vermittelt. Letztlich wird durch die Thematik des Visualisierens von Kommunikationskreisläufen im Speziellen die Methode des „Sesselsculptings“ vorgestellt.*

### **Introduction**

In the German language the word "Einblick" can be considered in at least three ways: an examination of a topic, of a space, of a subject, even of a person, material or fictional, that can be opened up, that can be offered, that is not necessarily self-evident, that can be worked for, that has great significance, ...

1. that insight, that one additionally creates for oneself, beyond the view that had already been obtained of a topic, space, subject or person
2. in admittedly rare situations, but present nevertheless is the emphasis of this word on the uniqueness of the view as if the word was linked to the numeral "one" , not with the preposition "in" or "into", as if it alludes to a special view and not multiple views.

The word "Einblick" also conveys the idea of an activity rather more than passive visual perception, an active look with apparatus required to perceive, or even being actively led by someone or something.

I think that providing insight and gaining insight represent important aspects of teaching with students. But also in social work, communication with clients is marked by this give and take, by the experiencing of information.

I am concerned with a form of communication for the teaching and learning of systemic thinking and its application to social work.

### ***The Partnership Context***

As a lecturer at the FH Campus Wien in the BA Social Work degree program, I had the opportunity to participate in the Leonardo Project STEP and required me to seek systemic principles and working methods, to spot similarities, to gain insight into what my colleagues from social work in several European countries understand by the term "systemic" and how they apply it.

At the preparatory meeting in Vienna in October 2010, it became clear to me that not just linguistic difficulties had to be overcome, but also that the meanings that exist in the different languages for the so-called systemic approach need to be developed. The way we were given to do this was by gaining insights into the various places via the funded project:

We started in London and in the Borough of Hackney I experienced a youth welfare system that has very recently been radically restructured and sees itself as a "systemic". It was noticeable to me what can happen when social workers, who have developed a common and systemic understanding, work together and - I hope for all involved - continue to do so. For a stereotyping of behavior, a looping into behavior patterns can also happen to so-called "systemic" teams.

In Aberdeen the topic was of how structures could be created so that work can proceed in an interdisciplinary fashion and in successful cooperation with the political institutions.

The insight provided by the colleagues in Helsinki is different. It had already been introduced by Katarina Fagerstrom in London in a contribution about "Open Dialogue", when she talked about psychiatric treatment in Western Lapland. This story encouraged me to organize a documentary about the work of Dr. Jaakko Seikkula and his colleagues and I noticed - again this is an insight into an effect of a consistent systemic attitude - an entirely differently structured psychiatry, a change in seemingly unchangeable patterns of organization and working attitudes.

The insight in Merseburg is characterized by Herwig-Lempp's stock phrase: "There are always more than seven solutions", His insistence on creativity in social work activities.

The partners in Lucerne offered me insight into what they see and appreciate as solution-focused work, and I see in them the desire to want to get those insights that are necessary in order to underlay that method with the systemic principles so as to notice when it makes sense regardless which method is applied.

It was through ASYS that my insight into systemic thinking was encouraged, therefore I can say that through ASYS a special insight into the systemic approach can be provided, and we now speak of the "Vienna School of Systemic Thinking"<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> cf. the article by Walter Milowiz in this book

### ***Offering Insight - Teaching Systemic Social Work***

From my experience, but not from studies, I think I can say that in recent decades a unique perspective of "systemic" has prevailed in social work, namely what I would describe as "cybernetics of the first order": students and teachers and workers in social work often speak of a "comprehensive view" of an "overall view" of "multi-dimensionality" of "multidisciplinarity". Or, since Alice Salomon and Ilse Arlt, some have called it the "self-evident systemic view" of social work, by pointing out that consideration has always been paid to many interacting factors that affect the individual as well as groups, and that everything is interdependent. That is already a great deal. This creates an awareness that it does not work so easily with simple plans, and that special methods are required. Often the newest, most effective of these are called "systemic solution-focused".

That a family should be seen as a "system" is regarded as a set phrase.

And family therapists should therefore work in a way that reflects "systemic" family therapy. Finally there often comes a postscript: "But often quite "unsystemic" actions are also needed!" - seen in cybernetics of the first order, yes.

But I want to offer the students in my course another view: a view that makes it possible to see something systemically, from a meta level, from the second order, in which even an "unsystemic method" can be seen as systemic. And what can develop from it is exciting and thrilling.

First, I try to convey what my axioms are; those that guide me in my view of the world and in my dealings with the world - then I try to get an impression (idea) of what they imagine, when I introduce and have introduced my concepts (theories, ideas), and in balancing the ideas again, adapt my explanations.

One topic is therefore semantics, the understanding of the meaning of words and the impossibility of the common understanding of concepts and thought processes, the impossibility of verifying, since the act of verifying is again subject to the language.

For many this theme is easy to understand - the narrative approach relies heavily on these experiences (eg, there is another description for "schizophrenia" ... and immediately other options for action are visible).

Behind this issue lies the issue of epistemology and the issue of perception. Assigning oneself to an answer like "We construct reality for ourselves", will not be easy for many, it conveys the feeling of the ground under one's feet being pulled away - similar to the experience of the people when Galileo moved the Earth away from the center, when Darwin presented evolution, Einstein and Plank brought out theories to which we have no daily reference and when Freud verified the unconscious.

The question then often arises: How then can you act?

Then I draw on theories from biology on the self-organization of biological systems (organisms) and on theories on human activity, behavior, interaction, and communication.

The introduction of the concept of "SYSTEM" as a tool, a construct for the establishing, visualizing of "self-sustaining human interaction processes" - and not for the defining of structures, clusters,

genealogies, etc.,

"System" as a self-generating, sustaining, almost organic interaction between participants. It then often makes sense to count so-called "uninvolved observers", seen from a wider point of observation in the system.

At this point, some become dizzy - like a dancer in the middle of the dance floor.

But why this relative "system" concept?

We are in education for social work and are confronted with the question of how we actually perceive and recognize things, processes, and therefore how we can usefully deal with them. By being able to understand communication processes, interactions and human relations (under the relativity of perception limitations), ideas about such relationships, which act on each other, are located via the auxiliary concept of system. Then there is the idea of to what extent an action on a system can be beneficial, how far it is reasonable and effective.

This is helped by topics, such as the analysis of interaction cycles, of those that maintain themselves and are suitably experienced by those involved, and those that maintain themselves but produce suffering and are unsuitably experienced by those involved - from the standpoint of someone thinking systemically, the latter are explained as "dysfunctional" or "a vicious circle".

Here is the point where social work recognizes its task: helping to change dysfunctional cycles in systems and with others.

In order to get a skill in the detection of "vicious circles", it is helpful to spend time with Watzlawick and his analysis of human interaction.

That digital messages, digital communication, are constantly gaining importance through analog messages, analog communication. So that communication is constantly explained by communication, and therefore never experiences an end point, but persistent meta-communication occurs, which is never to be reduced to a point.

By means of self-maintaining communication processes one can detect cycles that are mutually dependent. Such cycles, often called communication patterns, can be reduced to essential statements. Heinz von Foerster compares this with square roots in mathematics. One can then speak of acceptance or rejection of interaction partners, Watzlawick also speaks of "impaired communication", and means behaviors and statements that for the interaction partners appear confusing, disturbing, contradictory, and often paradoxical. We speak of dysfunctional relationships, when, despite painful experiences, such behaviors are maintained, become chronic or escalate. Very often, even what others refer to as fighting, as suffering in relationships, is not so experienced by those concerned but is part of everyday contact. Then the systems of the environment are, in the truest sense of the word, "affected". Some can fight back, some play along and do not realize it, some seek help.

Frequently a particular phenomenon will then happen in the classroom: Students will interpret very quickly, and also comprehensibly, where vicious circles are recognizable in exemplary case histories. And also very quickly, with sophisticated methodological considerations - one realizes what is now the

best thing to do there. That in itself is quite good; however, it quickly leads only to a very linear action because one's own position as observer and one's own behavior in the system is often overlooked.

### ***Visualizing the Observation of the Observation ...***

Usually, we express to our environment an insight, which we develop in our brains, through words in digital and behavior in analog form. We externalize (Latin *externere* - turn outward) our insights, impressions, thoughts, feelings, opinions in a verbally communicative way and expect effects back on the environment and on us, etc. Our language is formed from images, from metaphors - alone this phrase "*something of us is formed out of something*" - shows the imagery of what is written, of what is spoken, of what is thought.

Therefore, for me, visualizing, the imagining of what I believe to perceive already begins with the use of language. Anyone who knows and appreciates a careful use of language, knows how great the effect of words and sentences can be - on one hand in the unquestioned form, everyone knows what everyone means - on the other hand in the very different form of suggestion or poetry - and also know the problem that there can not be enough reaction on what is spoken and also what is written, since there is no time for it and because the analog messages in the background specify the proper tone and we answer back again in analog form.

Between me and my interlocutors a space is formed by words and voices and sounds; and this space is crisscrossed by communication. Perhaps also the German word "Beziehung" (relationship) fits as a spectacle for the back and forth tugging, moving, implying, turning, respond, ... In English I know the word relation (or relationship) for Beziehung and that again has the Latin "relatio" as its root, that contains meanings such as repetition, lessening.

To be able to describe such a relationship, on the one hand words are needed and with these words the analog messages; however, with the continual describing the relationship also grows like a spiral that evolves. The relations become more complex.

From a certain moment, it can then be useful to change the plane, to take distance and to supplement the medium of communication:

Representing the relationship through images on a surface area or by sculptures in the room.

Participants in one or more systems have the opportunity to watch the relationships, the relations, the spaces ... . Putting one's own insight on it on show, providing an insight for others.

The relationship that is usually defined by communication over content in any form, suddenly becomes the content itself, creating another kind of relationship and thereby often the possibility of changes.

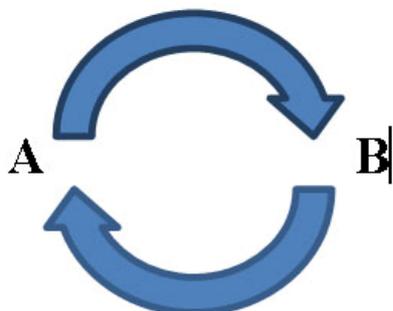
Here I think it is important to emphasize that I think the description, visualization of a relationship makes sense when done in such a way that an interaction of communication can be experienced:

The presentation should help us think about what who "says" to whom, what who conveys to whom.

The presentation should help us think about what who "says" to whom, what who conveys to whom.

An example:

**A conveys: "Nothing helps any more" - "I do not trust anyone."**



**B conveys: "I will do everything for you" - "I want you to trust me"**

Between these two, there can now be a lengthy process such as this: A withdraws, B tries to get closer ... It can also lead to an escalation, if they begin to make accusations about each other's intentions: A to B: "You only want to patronize me! You never give me any peace!" and B to A: "You do not understand! You are an ignoramus!" and many other accusations and insults.

Now, if a third person comes in as an observer, often in everyday life from the circle of acquaintances or from social work, it is possible that this third person C, in pointing out the structure of the relationships and patterns of behavior, can not change anything:

C at both: "Can't you see that A doesn't want help and B can't hold himself back?" and at the same time C conveys that both are behaving "badly, incorrectly, wrong" and will also be rejected.

Only if C remembers a systemic principle that I have not yet mentioned but can clearly be mentioned here, can a change in the relation of C to A and B and from A and B to C be achieved:

That, from the perspective of the person concerned, any behavior has meaning. C must therefore accept A and B's view of reality:

"Systemic" questions, "circular" question can make sense, can make sense quite clearly:

C asks A: "Can B be important for you, even if he thinks you do not trust him?"

Or C asks B: "Could A want everyone to understand how bad he feels?"

The attitude of acceptance coupled with pertinent questions and encouragement will bring change here.

In the classroom what here becomes clear is how extensive systemic questions are; is that they include solution-focused questions, for example, the so-called "miracle question". And it is noticed that for certain problems particular questions are better, some are less good and others not suitable at all because at the analog level of communication, an acceptance has to be conveyed; an acceptance that must be perceptible also to the other side, so that it is returned. For this I am happy to use the term "looking for and finding rapport".

***The method "Covert Seating Arrangement" (Austro-English: "Sesselsculpting") as an example of a visualization of relationships and a concrete application:***

In this type of arrangement, we use chairs. (In other popular systemic work people are used as media) chairs offer the advantage that they have a back and a front, and clear left and right sides. If one were to take rocks, plants or cuddly toys, the four sides would not be so clear.

The person who is arranging is asked to place a seat in the room for people or systems (one can also be placed for something abstract, e.g. God), for the problem that is occupying them and the question that will emerge from it. And in such a manner that the distance, the way the chair is turned towards or away from the participating people, systems or abstractions in accordance with the relationships. It is remarkable how strongly the person placing the chairs has a sense for how much even small shifts are harmonious for the respective relations or not.

Before the person begins to place the chairs, the names of the "participants in the problem system" are listed on a flip chart, which is kept hidden. Then the person starts to arrange the chairs. (If other people are present, they have to leave the room before the names are confirmed and the arrangement of chairs has taken place. They are only allowed to reenter the room after the "sculpture" has been completed.)

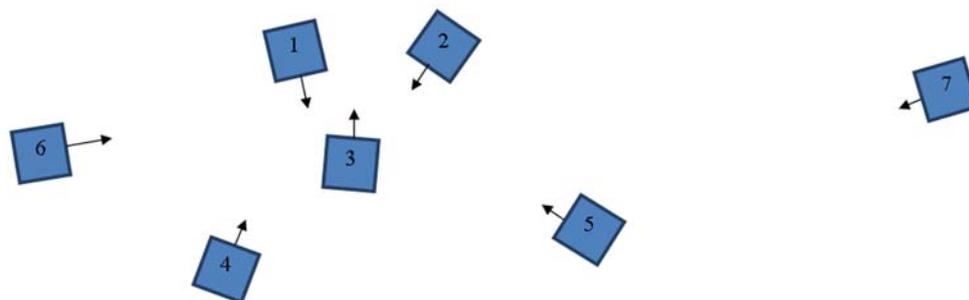
The naming of those participating in the problem and the arranging should go ahead very quickly and with very few words. The person leading the session notes, which chair is intended for which person, for which system - for the time being it remains hidden from the others.

Once the sculpture is completed and there is a group of participants, they will then be invited to choose a chair and to sit still in these chairs in the predetermined position. They are told they will be asked questions in order. The others remain silent spectators. Subsequently, the arranger is asked by the leader to listen attentively. However, if need be, they may also, in consultation with the supervisor, ask questions of those seated on the chairs. The questions of the leader focus mainly on: How do I feel in this chair? From this point on, how do I feel with others? How do the others probably feel with me? How do the others feel with each other from my perspective? Do I wish to change my position? Only the leader and the arranger know the name assigned to each chair.

Only after all the participants have been questioned and the arranger has also had the possibility to ask questions, are all the names, functions of those participating in the problem revealed. Thereafter, there is an exchange in the group about the effects of these insights.

Recently, at a workshop on "The Position of Social Work" I allowed myself to work on a question using a "Sesselsculpting". The arrangement should help to provide the participants with an insight into the "Position of Social Work" and from there, to discuss it.

For my deliberations, I used a particular case history. The participants I felt were necessary I placed thus (the arrows indicate the direction the chair is facing):



The numbers represent:

- 1: An unemployed older person, minimum income, with mental health problems and psychiatric experience
- 2: Consultant at Public Employment Service Austria (AMS)
- 3: Myself, as the consultant of an association that supports long-term unemployed people with special needs
- 4: A trainer from a social-economic company
- 5: A social worker from a psycho-social service
- 6: A social worker from the Municipal Department (MA) 40 (responsible for minimum incomes)
- 7: The Federal Minister of Social Affairs

If I recall the example mentioned above of the visualization of the relationship between A and B, then it becomes clear how complex such a drawing would appear if all seven participants here and their relationships were indicated by semicircular arrows to and fro. When the session leader is asking questions, of course all the relationships could be queried, the respondents themselves, however, mention the ones most important to them. Due to the positioning of the chairs, at the analog level, one type of relationship is indicated, and this will then be interpreted with statements like: "I'm fine with position 3, with position 5 I feel a bit confused, with position 2, I feel strongly connected". Even statements like "I feel comfortable or uncomfortable here, harassed or left alone" have a space and are appreciated by the others to a greater or lesser extent. In this sculpture, offers of relationships and perceptions of offers of relationships and rejections and irritations can be perceived.

With the disclosure in front of many observers, new perspectives and effects on the arranger and other interested parties emerge, due to their reactions.

In the discussion it was noticeable how quickly the opinions on the position of social work were divided into those who saw that the participants seek recognition and strive for this, and those who accused themselves and others, of not making an effort but of concerning themselves with other issues.

One result for me as arranger was to be able to clarify in a sensitive way the work done together with the institutions involved. One result for the workshop participants was to help them and also each other to recognize the efforts of social workers primarily benevolently, since a fall in appreciation of low efficiency in social work can take place very quickly.

For the students in my course, it should ultimately become clear that the systemic attitude in social work and therefore any methodical activity is characterized by the basic principles:

Networking, Constructivist thinking, self-preservation of systems, circularity of communication and that the observer is part of the observation.

### **References**

Förster Heinz von (1999): *Wie wir uns erfinden: Eine Autobiografie des radikalen Konstruktivismus.* Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag

Maturana Humberto (1996): *Was ist Erkennen? Die Welt entsteht im Auge des Betrachters.* Goldmann

Milowiz Walter (2009): *Teufelskreis und Lebensweg. Systemisch denken im sozialen Feld.* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Seikkula Jaakko & Arnkil Tom Erik (2011): *Dialoge im Netzwerk Neue Beratungskonzepte für die psychosoziale Praxis.* Paranus Verlag

Shazer Steve de (1996): *„...Worte waren ursprünglich Zauber“ Lösungsorientierte Therapie in Theorie und Praxis. Band 14 systemische Studien. verlag modernes lernen*

Simon Fritz B. (1982): *Lebende Systeme Wirklichkeitskonstruktionen in der systemischen Therapie.* suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft

Watzlawick Paul (1980): *Menschliche Kommunikation. Formen, Störungen, Paradoxien. 5.Auflage,* Verlag Hans Huber

<http://www.mindfreedom.org/kb/mental-health-alternatives/finland-open-dialogue/open-dialogue-daniel-mackler-film>

ASYS: [www.asys.ac.at](http://www.asys.ac.at)

FH-Campus Wien: [www.fh-campuswien.ac.at](http://www.fh-campuswien.ac.at)

## **Hackney - Systemic Approaches to Social Work Practice**

Robert Koglek & Sarah Wright, London Borough of Hackney

### ***Abstract***

*This paper describes the introduction and development of systemic approaches to social work practice within a statutory Children's Social Care department in an Inner London Borough. It also describes some of the changes in organisational structures and culture that have been made to support and embed a systemic approach to service delivery.*

---

*Dieser Artikel beschreibt die Einführung und Entwicklung eines systemischen Konzepts in einer staatlichen Kinder- und Jugendwohlfahrtseinrichtung in einem inneren Bezirk Londons. Er beschreibt darüber hinaus einige der Veränderungen der Organisationsstruktur wie auch –kultur, die den systemischen Ansatz im Alltag eines Sozialdienstes unterstützen und verankern.*

### **Introduction**

This paper describes the introduction and development of systemic approaches to social work practice within a statutory Children's Social Care department in an Inner London Borough. The paper also describes some of the changes in organisational structures and culture that have been made to support and embed a systemic approach to service delivery. Hackney Council is the only contributor to the STEP project that is a provider organisation rather than an academic establishment and we hope that this will allow us to contribute a unique perspective.

Hackney is an Inner London borough with high levels of poverty and a highly diverse population. Services delivered by the Children's Social Care division are primarily focused on child protection; children referred for services are mostly those at risk of significant harm. Whilst some children will receive support and intervention while living at home with their families, the authority is also responsible for the care of children that have been removed from the care of their families due to concerns about their safety and welfare.

Six years ago in Hackney, we began a process of radically changing the way that social work services were delivered to families. Our aim was to enable more children to live safely within their families. In order to achieve this we understood that we needed to provide a model of service delivery that promoted positive and sustainable change in the difficulties faced by users of our services. To do this we needed to ensure that a range of high quality expertise was available to assess and intervene with families. On review of the evidence base at that time, systemic approaches coupled with behavioural interventions were identified as strong methodologies for achieving change in family relationships and parenting behaviours and these became our core focus. As the model has become more sophisticated over time, other intervention approaches have been introduced whilst maintaining an overall systemic approach to our work.

Over a period of several decades child protection practice in England has become increasingly rule-bound and procedural. In response to a series of high profile child deaths, successive governments have introduced increasing amounts of policy and guidance in an attempt to reduce the potential for error. A key driver for the change we wanted to achieve in Hackney was an ambition to promote social work as a highly skilled profession in which thoughtful and skilful practitioners worked with families to achieve change. This ambition was set against a backdrop of political and societal narratives that were held about inept and incompetent social workers who worked in organisations that were inefficient and uncaring.

The Hackney Model of social work brings together social workers and clinical practitioners from a range of disciplines and backgrounds to work collectively and collaboratively with families, introducing multiple perspectives and providing professional support to each other in managing high risk situations. Initially, our model privileged the use of Family Therapists and systemically trained practitioners to assist social work practitioners in understanding and applying systemic ideas and principles in case work. As part of the remodeling of our services a training programme was introduced for social workers in the application of systemic theory and social learning theory. A significant proportion of the social workers in the service have now had the opportunity to complete either one or two years of training in systemic methodologies.

In parallel with the changes that we have made to our practice, a systemic approach is also embedded in our organisational structures and operations. Within the Hackney Model of social work all cases are held within small Social Work Units which are led by a Consultant Social Worker (CSW). In addition to the CSW, units comprise of input from Social Workers, Children's Practitioners, and Clinical Practitioners, some of whom are qualified Family Therapists, and a Unit Coordinator. These units have a high degree of autonomy and share responsibility for all the cases allocated to the unit, with the CSW holding overall accountability. All members of the unit are familiar with the family, child or young person through case discussion and direct work is undertaken by different unit members as appropriate. The unit coordinator provides enhanced administrative support freeing up time for practitioners to spend on direct work with families. All cases are discussed at weekly Unit Meetings which is the key forum for updating information, analysis, reflection, planning and decision making.

### ***Systemic themes and issues***

There are many systemic principles and ideas that we have found useful within our practice and that have informed the way the organisation operates. There is insufficient space here to cover all of these, but we will briefly outline a few of the key concepts that we believe are evident in both our direct work with families and our organisational culture and provide some brief illustrations of how these are applied.

A key concept in systemic theory is the value of holding and considering multiple perspectives and multiple possibilities. Enabling the expression of different viewpoints and interpretations is seen as an important tool in introducing 'difference', and therefore change, into a system, creating new

possibilities for the future. Post modernist developments in systemic thinking suggest that absolute truths do not exist, and hence there is no simple ‘one size fits all’ answer to complex problems. Holding this position enables the practitioner to avoid imposing their own solutions on situations, working instead with the family to develop their own solutions. Whilst, in the social work context, some ‘solutions’ or positions will not be acceptable and will require a more linear and authoritative intervention, a position of valuing difference can enable social workers to more readily recognise that there are many and varied ways in which children can be safely cared for within their families and to explore multiple possibilities. At a more organisational level this stance also promotes the valuing of different viewpoints and perspectives between practitioners, between managers and practitioners and between our own practitioners and those in other agencies. Within the child protection context familial situations are often highly complex and adopting simple and fixed interpretations and solutions can be both unhelpful and potentially dangerous.

Another of the key concepts in systemic theory is the importance of understanding the individual within their wider system. The individual is seen as connected to and impacted by multiple systems including their immediate and extended families, friendship groups, their wider communities, religious organisations, schools and myriad other groups and organisations. Families are also understood as being affected by the wider social and political context within which they live, so that the choices available to them may be both enabled and constricted by issues such as employment possibilities, the availability of support services, government policies, etc. Within our practice the child is always seen as part of their family system and all efforts are made to engage with the immediate and extended family and their wider support systems. Practitioners are tasked with understanding the context within which difficulties emerge and considering how changes in context might impact on the presenting issues. At an organisational level we pay attention to how the dynamics within social work units, between different levels of hierarchy within the organisation and between our own organisation and partner organisations (including police, health organisations and schools) impact on the effectiveness of what we do and shape the ways in which we interact with families.

Another important principle that has been emerged within the development of systemic theory is that of ‘second order cybernetics’, in which it is recognised that the therapist or practitioners is always part of the system that they are working with rather than a detached observer. The practitioner does not position themselves as an expert in the family’s functioning but as a ‘collaborator’ and co-constructor of change, working alongside the family to find new and, hopefully, more effective ways of interacting. These collaborative approaches inform the ways that our practitioners work with families on a day-to-day basis and how they orientate themselves in their professional relationships. Seeing the family as experts in their own functioning does not mean that the professional expertise held by social workers is not valued, but rather this becomes a resource that the family can draw on. At an organisational level, managers see themselves as sharing professional expertise with practitioners rather than sitting in a traditional hierarchical position. The engagement and involvement of practitioners is actively sought in shaping the ways that the organisation operates and develops.

### **Examples/Illustrations**

In this section we will present examples of the ways in which systemic thinking informs our work at a practice level, at a supervisory level and at an organisational development level.

*The following example illustrates some of the ways in which we engage with the multiple systems within which the child is situated:*

Fourteen year old Jenny told her teacher that she did not want to return home anymore and had been staying with families of friends for the past week. She feels that her mother doesn't listen to her problems, doesn't allow her to go out with her friends and doesn't give her enough pocket money. Her stepfather is also very strict with her; the other day she had wanted to wear a new dress, which led to a big argument with him as he asked her to get changed. He told her that she was too young to wear such outfits and that she looked like a prostitute. The teacher, concerned about Jenny staying with different people, made a referral to Children's Social Care. She felt that Jenny was vulnerable through her homelessness and could also be at risk of sexual exploitation as she seemed to be willing to stay with anyone who offered her a bed for the night. The case was allocated to a unit to assess the situation. When the social worker called the mother, she was told that the mother and her partner didn't want Jenny back living with them. She claimed Jenny was disrespectful, didn't accept any boundaries, swore and argued with everyone in the family. She often came home late at night and on several occasions her mother had the impression that Jenny was drunk. The mother added that she was a bad role model for her younger stepsister and she couldn't deal with her anymore.

To ensure that Jenny was living in a safe environment, she was asked if there were any family members she was aware of where she could stay. She identified an aunt, who agreed to have her live with her for a limited period of time.

As part of the assessment process information and views were sought from a range of sources, including Jenny's school, her sister's school, health professionals that knew the family, the police and youth services. Members of the family were met with individually and together by different members of the Unit, allowing them to share their own views about family life and enabling observations of their relationships. Jenny engaged well with the children's practitioner, who met her on a regular basis and gave her an opportunity to talk about her wishes and feelings.

In unit meeting discussions all practitioners agreed that there would be no significant concerns for Jenny's safety if she was living back at home, although support would be needed to ensure that she was making safe choices in her relationships outside of the home. An overall plan to support her to return to her mother and step-father's care was agreed. However, the social worker and the family therapist, who tried to work with the mother and her partner, were continually told by them that Jenny would not be allowed to come back to live with them. When asked where the mother would like Jenny to live, the answer was always that she had 'had enough' and that she didn't care. The step-father supported the mother's position. The mother suggested that the social worker should find a foster placement for her. After several weeks there were no significant shifts happening within the family and

at the same time the aunt announced that she would not be able to care for her niece for much longer as she would be travelling abroad.

The social work unit decided to arrange a Family Network Meeting. These meetings, which are adapted from the Family Group Conference model developed in New Zealand, involve wider family networks in decision making. The aim is to promote the family's ownership of difficulties and dilemmas and to enable them to reflect on their current situation with the aim of finding solutions for a presenting problem. These meetings are used in a variety of situations in Hackney including when children are at risk of coming into local authority care.

All family members known to the social work unit were asked to identify other family members and friends who might be interested in contributing to such a meeting or might be potential carers for Jenny and a date for the meeting was arranged. The people who attended the family network meeting were Jenny, the Consultant Social Worker, Jenny's mother and step-father, the maternal grandparents, the paternal aunt and her partner and a close friend of the family. The meeting was facilitated by an independent person who was not directly involved in casework.

To start the meeting, the consultant social worker was asked to give a brief synopsis of the case from his perspective. Then Jenny and her mother were asked to explain their situation as they experienced it. The chair summarised the purpose of the meeting which was to find a way that Jenny could move back into her mother's care and to get support from the wider family network to make a reunification successful. If the family were to come to the conclusion that a return home for Jenny would not be an option, other care arrangements within the wider family should be explored.

For the next phase of the meeting the chair and the Consultant Social Worker left the room to let the family discuss any options. About an hour later, they rejoined the family to hear about their ideas. The family had been very creative and came up with a joint care plan, whereby Jenny would stay with her mother during the week and with her maternal grandparents at the weekend. The friend of the family volunteered to provide care in any emergency situation. All members agreed that Jenny should be with her mother and had been able to help Jenny's mother to see that, with support, she would be able to cope with the challenges that this would present. The family also identified further support for Jenny and her mother that could be provided by the social work unit. Family therapy sessions with the unit clinician were agreed. In a separate meeting a plan of professional support for the family was agreed including additional support being provided by the school and youth services and Jenny's mother being referred to a support group for parents of adolescents. Arrangements were put in place for the family and the professionals providing support to meet regularly, monitor how things were going and agree additional support if needed.

It was still a long way to go for Jenny and her mother but as they were involved in making their own decisions instead of being told by professionals what was best for them, it was easier to accept the agreement and invest in making this workable.

*The following example illustrates the ways in which systemic ideas inform the ways in which members of the social work unit think about and analyse their interventions within weekly unit meetings:*

Our social work units meet on a weekly basis to discuss cases, reflect on actions previously taken and to agree plans for further intervention. By discussing all cases held by the social work unit, each unit member gets an update about work that has been carried out with individuals and about new information emerging from this work. The focus is then on reflecting on each case, agreeing future actions and defining what role each unit member will take. The unit meeting is the main vehicle for case work supervision within the Hackney Model.

We believe that the range of different expertise and perspectives within our social work units enables a more systemic approach to case work supervision than the traditional dyadic approach, generating better informed assessments of risks to the child. The shared responsibility and opportunities for co-working generate alternative viewpoints, a higher level of challenge and richer thinking in often very complex situations. We have also found that workers feel more able to 'hold' and manage risk when they are sharing and thinking about this with others. Moreover, in contrast to a traditional organisational structure in which a single social worker engages with the family, knowledge about the family and their history is held by more than one individual, meaning that if a worker is unavailable or leaves the organisation there are several other people who are able to provide continuity of response.

Units will often use a number of different systemic tools and techniques such as hypothesising, circulating questioning, and reflecting team approaches within their unit meetings to facilitate a richer discussion. For example, the unit might spend time generating a number of different hypotheses about why a child is refusing to go to school. Through a process of exploring these in the meeting they may then identify two or three possible explanations that they think fit best with the information that they have and agree how they might test or explore these further with the family. The child's voice or experience may be brought into the unit meetings through circular questioning, with one practitioner asking another "What do you think child X would say about that?" or "how do you think child Z might react to the statement their teacher made"? By using these kinds of questions the practitioner considers another perspective, the perspective of the child, enabling the voice of the child to be heard. These kind of questions can be extended to "What would the mother say if she heard the child saying what they said to you?". Units might use a reflecting team approach to assist in thinking about a situation in which, as a work group, they feel 'stuck', by asking a couple of workers or managers from another part of the service to observe their discussions and then discuss what they have seen, with the Unit observing this discussion and then reflecting together on what they have heard. This is a powerful way of enabling groups to consider ideas and perspectives about what they are doing which they have not considered themselves.

We have found that it is important to allow for creativity in the weekly unit meetings and to encourage diversity between the units. Each unit meeting will run differently, with input from differently skilled practitioners. Decisions made in a unit meeting might change from one week to the next, as new events take place in a family's life, new information emerges or a shift has been made in the way that they relate. Safeguarding children is the priority of our service and there are situations in which quick decisions have to be made, however these are exceptional and generally we aim to slow down,

ensure that we have time to reflect and make thoughtful decisions rather than react immediately to new information.

*The following example illustrates ways in which managers and practitioners work together to promote organisational learning:*

We as organisation we always aim to be continually learning about ourselves, where our strengths and weaknesses are and how we might be able to enhance the services that we provide to children and their families. We constantly seek feedback from a range of sources using a number of different techniques. One of these is through quarterly Case Review days, where senior manager and practitioners come together to explore practice themes (for example to look at how strongly children's voices are reflected in our practice). The process involves senior managers undertaking a number of case file audits, discussing together their observations and generating a number of hypotheses and themes that they wish to explore further. The senior management group then meet with groups of practitioners giving feedback about themes emerging from the audits and engaging in discussion with them about these. Social workers have an opportunity to reflect on these findings, to collaborate in the process of developing an understanding of strengths and challenges in practice and in generating ideas about introducing different practices. Managers aim to avoid blaming practitioners when problems are identified and seek instead to gain their understanding of what organisational and system difficulties might be impacting on practice. From an organisational perspective, we use these discussions to develop our services further. Findings and outcomes of these discussions feed into further training programmes and help us to rethink internal policies and procedures to ensure that they support practitioners.

## **Conclusion**

Our strong belief is that a systemic approach has enabled our managers and practitioners to provide child centred and respectful interventions that have drawn on existing family strengths. A focus on strengths has in turn provided opportunities for many families to re-write their 'stories' and to demonstrate their capacity to safely care for their children. Our experiences have reinforced to us that there is a powerful 'fit' between social work and systemic approaches and that the integration of these approaches offers enhanced possibilities for supporting children and their families.

We also believe that the structures and organisational processes that we have developed are supportive to practitioners and responsive to their feedback about what enables them to undertake their jobs effectively. The implementation, continual review and refinement of our model of service delivery has enabled the organisation to learn and adapt in an incremental way. Our investment in training our social work practitioners to adopt systemic approaches to their work has enabled us to develop the role of the clinical practitioner within the social work unit, freeing the organisation from the need to employ Family Therapists to lead on systemic practice. and opening up new possibilities for delivering other types of clinical interventions.

## **Systemic Social Work- a Glimpse from Inside Scotland**

Anke Maas-Lowit and Mike Maas-Lowit, Robert-Gordon-University Aberdeen

### ***Abstract***

*This chapter discusses systemic social work within the Scottish system for working with people who have committed serious criminal offences and who also experience mental disorder, in this case, mental illness. It outlines the systemic relationship between both social worker and the offender and wider systems of law, Court and politics and it relates these to family and community systems where the commission of a serious criminal offence impacts upon relationships widely and lastingly.*

*The chapter is an attempt to examine how systemic work can be of value in the most restrictive of circumstances, where both social worker and the subject are limited in choice of action by legal processes and political oversight.*

---

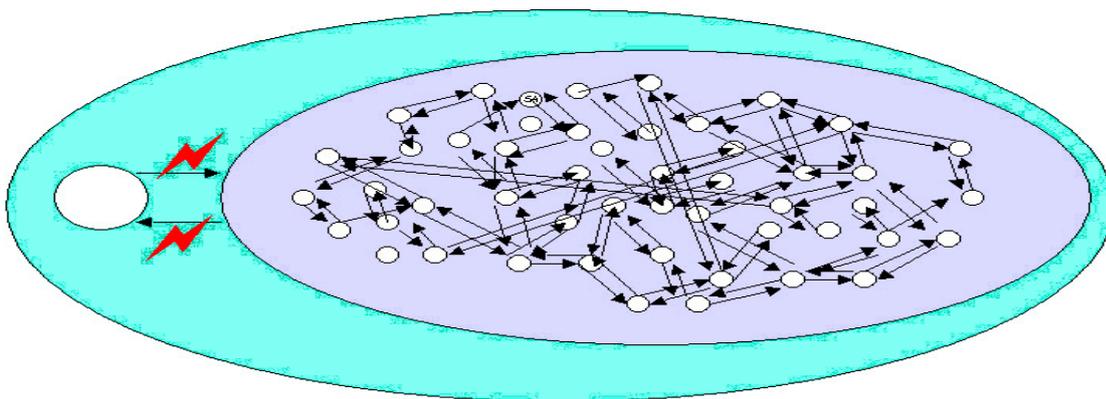
*Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit systemischer Sozialarbeit, die das schottische Sozialsystem für Menschen anbietet, die schwer wiegende Straftaten begangen und die zugleich eine psychische Krankheit haben. Er befasst sich mit der systemischen Beziehung zwischen Täter/Kranken, Sozialarbeiter und dem weiteren systemischen Umfeld von Gesetzen, Rechtssprechung und Politik, sowie in welchem Masse diese in Beziehung zu Familien und deren sozialem Umfeld stehen, und welche langzeitige Wirkung eine Straftat auf diese Beziehungen haben kann.*

*Der Beitrag ist ein Versuch zu erläutern, wie systemische Sozialarbeit unter sehr restriktiven Umständen nützlich sein kann, wo sowohl Sozialarbeiter als auch Klient nur eine begrenzte Auswahl von Interaktionen haben, begrenzt sowohl durch den Strafvollzug als auch durch politische Prozesse.*

It would not be possible to give an overview of systemic social work practice within Scotland in one short chapter. Rather, this chapter seeks to illustrate practice from two over-lapping perspectives: The first of these will set out a systemic view of what can broadly be called the State- relationships between politics, government agency, social work services, the social worker, the public and those individuals more specifically involved in any given particular situation. The second and closely related perspective is from that of a practitioner specifically involved in the delivery of services to mentally disordered offenders- that small group of people who are affected by mental disorder, who appear to have committed or have been found guilty of committing serious offences. Once identified, this group of people have their care and treatment needs managed within a strongly regulated framework closely prescribed by law and policy, often in situations of high security. This situation begs the question which we will address - does systemic social work have anything positive to offer when the service user is forced by law to participate in the service, where choice and free -will are severely curtailed and where personal freedom is so restricted that it limits the scope for both practitioner and service user.

It may occur to the reader to ask why we chose to write about such a highly specialised and restrictive area of practice when there are more evident examples of systemic practice in Scotland- for example the current frame for working with Children and Families (Scottish Government 2013). The answer to this is that there is a growing body of thinking about systemic social work with people who opt to work with social work or who are moderately constrained to do so. If we can show the worth of systemic work with a group of people who have the most restricted choice (service users, by compulsion of law and practitioners, by the strict legal and policy framework) then it demonstrates the case for systemic social work more strongly.

Elsewhere in this manual and wider publication, space is given to the problems of defining systemic social work (Child 2012; Milowiz, 2011). We are going to place this problem of definition side by side with something else equally difficult to define - politics: Many people view politics as being an entity limited to its formal processes - the activities of politicians (especially those in power) and the institutions of government. For the purposes of a systemic understanding of politics we require a broader definition - one that acknowledges the important dynamic role that all members of a state play in its politics. This view acknowledges that we are all inescapably involved in politics both as recipients or consumers of the policies and laws which politicians make, but also as people who have an active influence upon politics. This would be true of any political system, even a dictatorship, where compliance or noncompliance influences the system. However its truth seems self-evident in a democracy. To illustrate this conception, many of the people who receive social work services are caught in unfulfilling relationships not just with personal acquaintances, but also with agencies such as the Police, the Courts, the systems which provide welfare, housing, health and education. It is possible to use the systemic lens to analyse and intervene in these problematic relationships by the same processes which we can use for examination of intervention in personal relationships with individuals, families and groups. Just as the practitioner becomes a part of the looping structure in which he or she intervenes in small-scale relationships (Milowiz, 2011), so the practitioner is a participant in helping the individual to successfully adjust problematic relationships in the political sphere.



Milowiz' (2011) conception of the outsider and society (above) may be conceived as the individual excluded from the beneficial power-sharing processes of politics as we have described them.

A note of caution must be introduced into this complicated mix: We must take care not to be unquestioning agents who seek to reconcile individuals with aspects of the State, where the State is

part of the problem, any more than we ought to be therapists reconciling a person to remain in an irreconcilably abusive relationship. For example, many users of social work services are arguably failed by politics in that they are failed by the education system, they are offered limited and limiting opportunities, they have limited access to power and their lives are diminished by poverty (which can be viewed as a failure of equitable resource distribution). With this statement it can be clearly seen that the social worker's role is inescapably a political one- to collude with or challenge perceived social injustice.

Having set out the broad perspective of a political dynamic in systemic social work, it is time to explain a little of the Scottish situation and its particular reference to care, treatment and management of mentally disordered offenders. In conceiving the following, it is important to hold in mind that legal, political and policy systems can be understood systemically, no less than can personal or familial relationships.

The first thing to acknowledge is the quasi-legal term mentally disordered offender, which is not a very user-friendly term. Few people would willingly adopt it as a label. It already carries overtones of power-imbalance. However we will use it as a term of reference because it is the term of preference of law and policy within which the practitioner must practice. We have already partially defined the term by relating it to persons who have mental disorder and who have, or appear to have committed serious offences. Later in this chapter case illustrations will quantify the sort of crimes which merit the description "serious offences", but for now we need to explain what mental disorder is: The relevant Scottish legislation, the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, Section 328 (1) defines mental disorder as "mental illness, learning disability or personality disorder however caused or manifested". Therefore the term is a definition accepting of medical concepts of mental illness, with all that that implies for diagnosis and treatment. It is not our place here to argue for or against this situation. We simply acknowledge that the law places powers and duties on medically qualified doctors to diagnose the presence of mental disorder in people who have committed such offences.

However, it may be of value to digress for a moment to consider that the person that the Mental Health Act calls *the patient* is a person who is involved with several overlapping systems of influence: Psychiatry, with its predominantly medical orientation is a system. Social work with its social conceptions of the dynamic impact of mental illness upon society and society upon the person who experiences/manifests mental illness is a system. In fact, this system, as we have just described it could be conceived as a feed-back loop as illustrated above. Systems of hospital management, welfare provision and such matters all apply equally well.

For the moment, to help the reader envisage a situation where someone might be thought of as a mentally disordered offender, consider the following example of a person who is upset by delusional and hallucinatory experiences caused by a psychotic illness and who commits murder because of this condition. Consider a woman with a postpartum or puerperal psychosis (a psychotic disorder which manifests itself shortly after childbirth). Puerperal psychosis is often characterised by extreme confusion, delusion and hallucination (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

To illustrate from a real situation, read the following extract from a case where a woman, an ex-nurse, did kill her five children in England and there ensued a criticism of the justice system for not recognising that she had a mental disorder which may have unduly influenced the commission of the crime. The extract relates to her mental state when she was imprisoned following trial. We chose it because it describes so well the mental condition of someone who was propelled to commit most serious crimes because of a mental illness.

“In jail, Andrea said she had considered killing the children for 2 years. She had not been a good mother to them, she said; they were not developing correctly. She claimed to have been marked by Satan, and that the only way to save her children from hell was to kill them. Then, when the state punished her for their deaths, Satan himself would be destroyed. Television cartoon characters told her she was a bad mother. She heard a human voice that told her to get a knife. On the walls of the jail, she saw satanic teddy bears and ducks” (McLellan, 2006. Page 1951).

In offering such an example we do not wish to stigmatise and falsely portray people affected by such illnesses as inherently dangerous. We simply want, in the minimum number of words, to create a situation in which the reader may have an idea of our subject. There is an evident plea in the article from which this extract is taken; that Andrea was (to put it very simply) not a bad person who chose to do bad things. However we would acknowledge the over-simplification of this case. Mentally disordered offenders share the broad spectrum of character that we all share. Some commit crimes with a premeditated degree of malice. Some do not. Some seem to us as nice people in very unfortunate circumstances, some do not. What they all share is the apparent seriousness of the crime and the presence of mental disorder.

To draw on a systemic analysis in the shadow of the dramatic example given above, Andrea is caught up in a series of large systems, all of which have vested interests in defining her actions: The medical/psychiatric system suggests motivations other than purely personal ones for the commission of the crime. That is to say, the medical idea of a mental illness may suggest that Andrea was not committing a crime as wilfully as someone who commits murder without any mental illness. The legal system seeks to mediate between its core ideas of crime, establishment of guilt and the medical evidence of mental illness. The political system seeks to manage high-public profile situations such as the murder of children by their mother in such a way as meets the political objectives of those in power. These systems interrelate to mediate an outcome for the offender. Meanwhile, “the offender” is a person who is caught up in a web of personal relationships and it is the social and emotional consequences of this that are the domain of social work. Within this, social work is also a system, which has legal duties towards the large political and legal systems.

To take a step back from this close view, the Scottish systems of law, policy and politics in which all of this takes place are quite separate from other systems in the UK. Scotland has devolved government, which means that it has its own parliament and government in Edinburgh for making laws in areas such as health, justice, social care and education. For other purposes such as defence, border control, and foreign policy, it shares common government with the rest of the UK in Westminster, London.

The Scottish forensic system, in which mentally disordered offenders are managed, sets out law and policy about how courts may try people, what disposals the courts may make to commit people to hospital for treatment when an offence has been committed, how the secure hospital systems may manage offenders by restricting their freedom, locking doors against them leaving, compelling them to take treatment, managing the risks they pose to society, helping them to work towards lesser restrictions of freedom, possibly eventually moving out of hospital to be managed in the community and what rights the mentally disordered offender has to contest and appeal against these processes. Within this process, in a small country like Scotland, politicians take a very close interest because of their vested interest in getting it right in managing the tension between public safety and the rights of the offender. On the one side are the human rights of the offender, which dictate that any restriction of freedom must be legally justifiable and therefore, that everyone has a right to rehabilitation. On the other hand there is the risk of public outcry when things go wrong; when someone known to the system as a mentally disordered offender has the liberty to commit further offences. An unfortunate dynamic in this is the high interest that the media takes in situations where a person with a diagnosis of a condition such as schizophrenia murders or seriously harms another person. Therefore, to apply some of our top to bottom systemic analysis of politics, the First Minister for Scotland, the equivalent of a prime minister or chancellor, will take a very close interest in how certain individuals are being managed within the forensic system so that their rights are preserved without undue risk to the protection of the public.

One of the central roles in all of these processes from assessment of individual to management of the risks they pose is the Mental Health Officer (MHO) - a specially qualified social worker who has very specific powers and duties under law in relation to this taxing business. For those readers less familiar with UK-wide social work in general and Scottish social work in particular, it may be worth pointing out that social workers are trained to have a very active regard for law in ways less familiar in some countries. This is no - where more evident than in the role of MHO, which plays out centrally on the legal stage. While still very much a social worker in the generic sense, the MHO is an agent of the law in very precise ways.

The following case example is entirely fictitious. However, it represents a fairly typical example of situations discussed above. It will become apparent to the reader how a systemic approach may be helpful and conducive to recovery for an individual and his/her family, where a serious crime has committed. It will be seen that the situation is subject to the already described fine balance of public safety and legal scrutiny on one hand and the right to rehabilitation and recovery on the other.

James is a 17 year old young man who was diagnosed with Schizophrenia when he was 15. When unwell, James believes humanity is at risk from a great evil power. He receives auditory hallucinations from a range of sources, including the radio and the TV. He believes one to be the voice of God who commands the great sacrifice of having sexual intercourse with a child as a vehicle for God to re-enter the world and be able to save it. James has only been to hospital once, when he was first diagnosed. While he is not too certain that what he experiences are due to an illness, he feels less distressed

when on medication and also quite likes his psychiatrist. James lives with his parents and his younger sisters Karen (14) and Rosie (09). About a year ago, the family moved to a different part of the country after Rosie was sexually assaulted by a neighbour's son, who was too young to be prosecuted. The family and James did not re-register with medical services after the move. James remained well for some time but bit by bit his old voices returned. James, who occasionally baby-sits a 5 year old girl, raped her in the belief that this is the sacrifice that will ultimately save the world. The little girl who was very hurt and upset is able to describe to her parents what has happened.

James has been arrested and placed in a highly secure hospital setting, to which he has been returned after the court made an order for him to be detained indefinitely. Treated and no longer acutely unwell, James is deeply distraught at what he has done. His family move back to their old village after a threat of vigilante attacks (smashing windows of the family home, painting abusive slogans on the walls and making threats).

James's parents are deeply upset about what has happened and have no explanation. Both feel very guilty about not having ensured that James registers with medical services but neither saw any sign of him becoming unwell. James mother has never come to terms with what happened to Rosie and cannot understand how her son could turn into such a "monster". Although James makes it clear how much he misses his mother particularly, she is unable to visit him.

Although this process is likely to take years, the long term plan is for James to return to live with or near to his parents who, given the rural area and lack of support services, are considered to be a vital source of future support.

We can apply the looping structure (Milowiz, 2011) to this family in their interpersonal relationships, their interaction with the community and in relation to the political domain as described above.

Herwig-Lempp suggests that the beginning role for systemic social work is to negotiate and mediate between all parties involved in the situation. At once it becomes apparent how complicated this task is, not just because of the emotional complications that confront the family members, but because the event (the rape of a child) potentially involves a very wide community. Intervention is required legally to ensure public safety and the community's faith in this. Therefore, the political and legal networks are means by which the social worker (in this case, the expert MHO) negotiates and mediates between the perpetrator (James), his family and the wider community of the State. Both because of a responsibility to James and his family and because of the responsibility to public safety, some work will need to be undertaken with James and his family to understand and accept this. This is the point of convergence- It is in the interests of both the agencies of the Court, police and forensic secure hospital and James and his family that he is kept well and free from the symptoms of his illness. Otherwise, he is at risk of becoming ill and harming another vulnerable life.

James and his family, particularly his mother and Rosie need opportunity to grasp that the offence occurred in the context of mental illness. In such a complex situation, a systemic approach can create an ideal environment to begin the process of healing and rehabilitation. This is a two way process of educating and explaining about mental illness to family members who may have been deeply harmed

by the events. It also involves understanding the dynamics of the family- what relationships were like before both Rosie became a victim of abuse and James became a perpetrator. Putting these two perspectives together will help the family to revise their understanding of the situation and to arrive at a more fulfilling explanation than “how could James turn into such a monster?”

It is this shared understanding which is the germ of an ability to move forward.

Another way of understanding the interconnectivity of this looping and the problems that it leaves for all parties is to conceive of the event, the commission of a serious sexual assault by James, as a pebble dropped into a pool of water.



The dropping of the pebble causes concentric ripples, each one connected to the others on the surface of the water. Those stronger ripples, nearest to the centre would equate to the implications for close family, victim and victim’s family. Those further removed ripples would equate to the friends, neighbours and community, and those furthest removed would equate to those like the politicians and general public, for whom the effects are not directly personal but do who experience potential to feel concerned.

Nothing can ever be done to restore the surface of the pool to the way it was before the offence. However, the task for the systemic social worker is to restore as much tranquillity as possible. When conceived of in this manner, it is possible to see that the ripple of effect for James, or for his family, cannot be resolved without seeking resolution for those ripples of community, school, wider society and the political domain.

Helping James’s family to understand that he is not a “monster” will help them to understand and respond to or deal with reaction within the community in which they live. Although a difficult and challenging task, stabilising family relations will assist James’s sisters to manage the difficult relationships in school and it may even help the school to manage the disquiet that it causes in the school community..... and so on to the wider ripples.

## **References**

American Psychiatric Association, 2013, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Arlington Va, American Psychiatric Association

Child, N. (2012) Many Meanings of Systemic, Systemic Practice Network (on –line)

Herwig-Lempp, J Systemic Social Work in Germany, STEP, asys.ac.at

Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, asp 13. Norwich, HMSO

McLellan, F. 02/12/2006. Mental Health and Justice, The case of Andrea Yates, Elsevier Inc: The Lancet, Vol 368, issue 9551, pp:1951-1954.

Milowiz, W . (2011) The Principle of Feedback Loops, STEP, [asys.ac.at/step/substance/basics](http://asys.ac.at/step/substance/basics)

Scottish Government, 2013 on line at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright>

## **Introducing Systemic Social Work beyond Europe: How Social Work benefits from the Systemic Perspective**

Lisa Werkmeister Rozas, University of Connecticut School of Social Work

### ***Abstract***

*Students of Social work in the USA have not been regularly exposed to systemic approaches. The author explains, why systemic social work would foster one's own consciousness about being part of a system, and how theory and practice are consistently woven together.*

---

*Studierende der Sozialarbeit in den USA hatten bisher kaum Zugang zu systemischen Ansätzen in ihrer Ausbildung. Die Autorin beschreibt, wie systemische Sozialarbeit das Bewusstsein der eigenen Mitverflochtenheit jeder Person in Systeme fördert, und die Konsistenz von Theorie und Praxis.*

Social workers in the United States have long been exposed to concepts such as solution focused work, client centered work, the strengths perspective, family therapy, and constructivist theory. However, there has been little exposure to approaches, such as systemic social work, that blend the varied concepts into one framework to be practiced with clients. The systemic social work approach has much to offer social work programs around the globe.

In the United States Schools of Social Work are overseen by a governing body, the Council on Social Work Education, that accredits and monitors each School's curriculum. It strives to assure that Schools of social work require students to develop a standard set of competencies required by the profession. The curricula in most Schools are often very full; faculty often have a limited amount of time to offer specialized topics that go in-depth. Often, faculty have to choose which theories to present, while omitting others, and as a result students are either exposed to a broad range with not much depth or a small number with more detail. The advantage of introducing systemic social work to U.S. Social Work students is that it draws from a variety of theories, such as solution focused, systems theory, strengths perspective, short term treatment, and yet is an approach by itself. Students can use the systemic social work approach as method and/or choose to look more in-depth at any of the theories on which it draws as they continue to develop their social work skills.

One aspect of Systemic social work which makes it very well suited for social work is that it is taught with a focus on applicability. Theory and practice are woven together in a manner that makes the methods very accessible, practical, and easy to utilize and understand. Since it has as one of its main tenets, that the client is the expert, and its origin stems from various theoretical approaches, its methods are also easily combined with other theoretical perspectives and approaches that are widely used in social work. This approach is appropriate for all areas and social work, micro and macro.

Systemic social work requires that students think critically about their practice with clients. It enhances empathy and broadens their own perspectives about self and others. Systemic social work specializes in helping students create an elasticity of perspective that allows them to imagine a variety

of solutions and hypotheses that can be generated between client and worker. For social workers in the U.S. this is helpful because it is an important aspect of working with clients of different cultural backgrounds. Social workers must have the ability to acknowledge different perspectives as well as solutions that can arise out of different cultural values and traditions. Since it is impossible to teach every social worker about every cultural tradition that is practiced, the ability to entertain, imagine, and welcome various perspectives is crucial. Multiple perspective taking also serves those who some may have perceived as “beyond help” because they have been in the care of the system for a long time; it helps to develop other possible changes to their situation.

Systemic social work would work best if offered in the beginning of a student’s social work education. It can serve as a survey of some of the well-known theories that exist and often utilized in social work and is grounded on the basic understanding of systems, in which all social workers work.

For this European method to be welcomed and utilized in another country, it is important to present it within the context of a well-regarded systemic social work belief: this is not the only (or best) approach. Ask what social workers already know about systems and have them reflect on the term “systemic” and “systems” so as to understand that these words have many meanings; thus, utilizing another well-regarded systemic social work principle of resource orientation.