

Systems Theory, Worldview and  
Transactional Family Process

Systems Theory

Egan and Cowan have helped us to better understand the term system by the elaboration of (1) system, (2) human system, and (3) systems world (1979:66):

1. A system is a set of components that affect or influence one another. One component cannot be adequately understood unless the influences that affect all of the components are known. In this sense, the atom, the human body, and our galaxy are all systems.

2. A human system is one in which the components are people, including a people's history and culture as these affect the system in the present. Examples of human systems are families, schools, business, neighborhoods, governments, and voluntary associations.

3. Systems world refers to the fact that all of us participate in, influence, and are influenced by human systems that affect one another. Individuals are affected by their families and the places where they work, businesses are influenced by other businesses and by the economic system, and nations influence one another in the political world order.

After the term system is defined, the basic tenets are explained as followed.

1. Boundary

Every system has a boundary which differentiates it from the outside world. The major differences between systems, however, are not physical or geographical, but are differences of tradition, beliefs, history, values,

and emotions which establish for each system a totally unique climate, or sentient boundary (Lindgren and Shawchuck 1977:40).

This boundary may be described as semi-permeable in the sense that essential elements must be kept inside the system, while products can leave and raw materials can enter (Rogers 1979:251). Once the boundaries have been identified and the system set off from its surrounding environment, it is possible to classify each particular system on a continuum from open to closed (Broderick and Smith 1979:113).

Family systems theorists conceptualize the family as an open system that functions in relation to its broader sociocultural context and that evolves over the life cycle (Walsh 1982:9). As an interactional system normal families operate according to rules and principles that apply to all systems (Bertalanfy 1968; Buckley 1967).

That a system is open means "not simply that it interchanges with the environment, but that this interchange is an essential factor underlying the systems viability, its reproductive ability or continuity, and its ability to change" (Buckley 1967:50").

Strain and tension for a family or any social system are inevitable, but open systems do not necessarily dissolve, for they are capable of making change, and of

responding productively to stress whether it is internally or externally stimulated (Kantor 1975:11).

A closed system exchanges neither energy nor matter nor information with its environment; it is totally cut off from the outside world. The system uses its own internal reserve of potential energy. As its reactions take place, entropy advances irreversibly. As the entropy is maximized: the system dies (de Rosnay 1975:67).

The question for the Christian families is, how open should the family boundary be to God and to its culture at relevant points.

## 2. Teleology and Circular Causality

The mechanistic worldview born out of classical physics of the nineteenth century led man to understand phenomena in an analytical fashion. This analytical approach leaves no room for any directiveness, order or telos for the cosmos. Linear causality is accepted as law. But modern science in all fields find this analytic approach insufficient and the linear causality too simplistic for complex systems. Family systems theorists acknowledge the importance of the family goal and circular causality. But they pay more attention to the interactions than the goal. For them, a family system can be defined as a group of individuals interrelated so that a change in any one member affects other individuals and the group as

whole; this, in turn, affects the first individual in a circular chain of influence.

For the Christian families we have to see their well-beings in terms of multi-faceted interactions within and with the external environment. On the other hand we have to ask, what is the ultimate goal of a normal family.

### 3. Organizational Complexity

Buckley defines organized complexity as "a collection of entities interconnected by a complex net of relations." He distinguishes this concept from organized simplicity—" a complex of relatively unchanging order or linear additivity"— and from chaotic complexity, a vast number of components that do not have to be specifically identified and whose interaction can be described" as forming no coherent pattern other than those associated with the probabilities of absolute chance" (1967:38).

Human systems like the family are complex. The primary reason for this is the existence of systems within a hierarchy. The system is therefore a series of levels of increasing complexity (Littlejohn 1978:32).

This type of system may be viewed through a family tree. But the tree model of the hierarchy only provides a picture of formal, relationship of a system, it does not indicate the quality of those relationships or the lines of communication between people. That points the

nonsummativity of a family.

The family as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and it cannot be described simply by summing up characteristics of individual members. The family systems contain subsystems, specifically: (1) interpersonal subsystems and (2) personal or psychological subsystems, which contribute to the family functioning (Galvin and Brommel 1982:37).

The interpersonal subgroups are likely to be made up of two or three persons and their relationship between or among them. Even a three-persons system becomes complicated by the interpersonal subsystems within it. Thus each of the subsystems has to be considered in order to understand the functioning of the whole (1982:37).

Galvin and Brommel further point out that the personal or psychological system means that each member or personal subsystem contain unique biological and psychological characteristics. Throughout life the experiences encountered by each member differ from those of others in the family and continue to heighten the individuality of each member differ from those of others in the family (1982:39).

The organizational complexity of the systems theory reminds us about our emphasis in studying the biblical concepts of family. Should we go on debating on the formal

hierarchical relationship of the family members, or should we shift our focus to the more function-oriented interactional patterns that involve psycho-social dynamics of the family?

As a normal family, should we pay more attention to assist each member to better develop their God-given authentic humanhood as he or she interacts with the other subsystems than be preoccupied with the working out of some discrete disciplinary imperatives in a linear causal manner within the family?

#### 4. Equifinality

An open adaptive system demonstrates equifinality or the ability to achieve a similar final state in many ways from many different points. Equifinality means that the same origin may lead to different outcomes, and the same outcome may result from different origins (Walsh 1982:9).

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson assert that the influence of initial conditions or events will be outweighed by the impact of the family organization—its ongoing interactional patterns and responses to stress. Thus, one family may be disabled while another family rallies in response to the same crisis; or two well-functioning families may have evolved from quite different circumstances (Walsh 1982:10).

This characteristic of system theory cautions those

who attempt to construct a static transtemporal "Biblical" model for universal applications. This principle also provides us with a framework that allows innovative and diversifies means to approach the normative state.

#### 5. Communication

All behavior is regarded as communication, transmitting interpersonal messages. Every communication has two functions: a "content"(report) aspect, conveying factual information, opinions, or feelings; and a "relationship" (command) aspect, which, in conveying how the information is to be taken, defines the nature of the relationship (cited by Walsh 1982:10). On the basis of their research in families, Kantor and Lehr assert that the information processed by the family system is distance-regulation information (1975:12). Thus the major information processed by a family system contains the messages which regulate separateness/connectedness or cohesion (Galvin and Brommel 1982:36).

Another aspect of communication, is that family units, as ongoing relationships, stabilize the process of defining relationships through mutual agreements or family rules (Walsh 1982:10).

This aspect of systems theory helps us to see the growth or normal functioning of the family through dynamic dialogue of "interpersonal" message instead of the one-way

assimilation of propositional information or authoritative manipulation by a certain family member. This is a fresh perspective to look at the normal family process.

#### 6. Family Rules (or Strategies)

Family rules, both explicit and implicit are relationship agreements which prescribe and limit familial response to any of a wide range of possible inputs. They provide expectations about roles, actions and consequences that guide family life. Through the operation of a "redundancy principle," a family tends to interact in repetitious sequences, so that family operations are governed by a relatively small set of patterned and predictable rules. Family rules operate as norms within a family, by which behavior is measured and from which it varies in degree.

Values, most often originating in extrafamilial influences, such as religion and culture, exert leverage on family relationship by enforcing or affirming family norms (Jackson 1965). Families develop different life styles based on their family rules (Ford & Herrick 1974).

It should also be noted that "family rules or strategies" are used here to mean norms for guiding daily ordinary life operations. They are differentiated from the higher level rules of transformation which is referred by anthropologists as worldview. If the family rules fails



to handle the ongoing inputs due to the lack of alternative ways. The system may be immobilized, breakdown, resort to violence or experience the state of morphogenesis.

#### 7. Calibration and Feedback

Calibration implies checking and rectifying a scale, and in the case of a family, it implies checking and rectifying if necessary, the scale of permissible or acceptable behaviors. Hence a system engages in what is called "morphostatsis" or an attempt to maintain the status quo (Galvin and Brimmel 1982:31).

Systems generate negative and positive feedback, within systems language the terms are used differently than they are in everyday usage. Negative feedback implies constancy and serves to maintain the acceptable standard and to minimize change, whereas positive, or change-promoting, feedback results in recalibrating the system at a different level. No value is implied by the labels (1982:11).

According to Olson, positive feedback provides the family system with "constructive" system-enhancing behaviors that enable the system to grow, create, innovate, and change, i.e. system morphogenesis. Conversely, negative feedback attempts to maintain the status quo, i.e. system morphostasis" (1979:11).

The morphogenesis level of feedback network is illustrated in the following diagram (Broderick andsmith 1979:123):

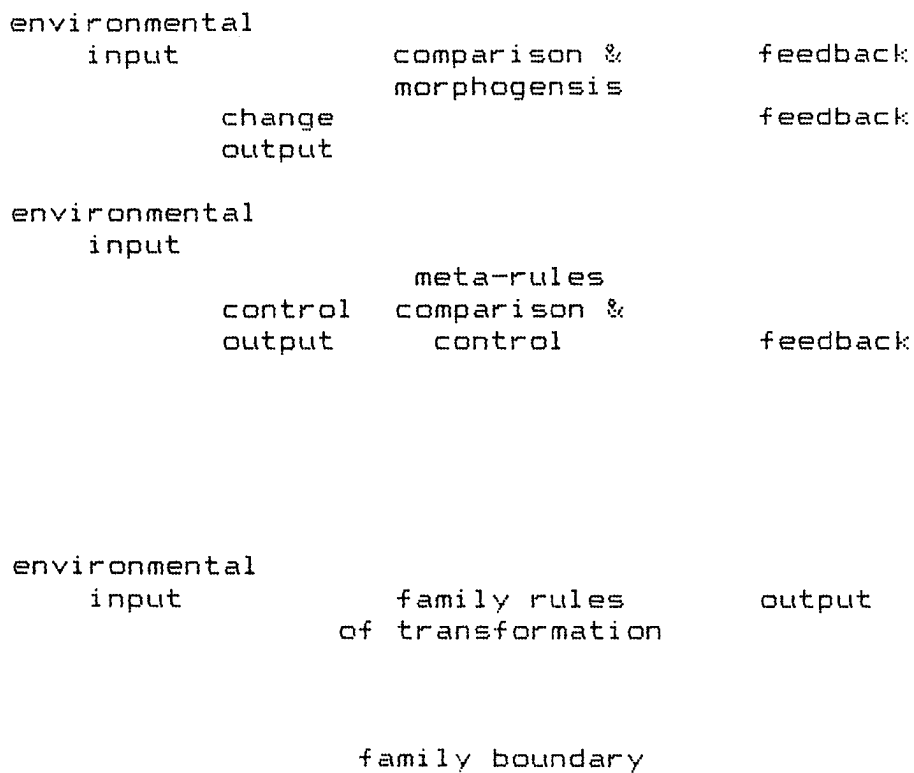


Figure Feedback-Morphogenesis

Within each system there is a subsystem termed a "leading edge" (Beavers 1977) or sensor/decider subsystem which serves in a role of communicating with all other parts and with the outside world. Without such a decider subsystem, the system will be very limited in its ability

to coordinate activities, develop goals, and exert power to accomplish them (Rogers 1979:252).

When one's family rules have been developed over time, that family may be viewed as calibrated or "set" to regulate its behavior in conformity to the rule. If your family or an outside force alters the rules, the family is recalibrated in accordance with new rules.

#### 8. Abnormality

From a systems vantage point, individual malfunction is also seen as symptomatic of current family malfunction. Yet the individual's distress may function as a homeostatic regulator, restoring family stability by expressing and deflecting family tension. Abnormality is thus defined as a relationship problem. The individual's symptomatic behavior is seen as embedded in a malfunctional interaction pattern (Walsh 1982:11).

There are a number of ways in which a system can malfunction. The openness or closeness of a boundary affects the proper functioning of a family system. If boundary is unclear or too permeable, toxic elements may be admitted which poison the system. If the boundary is too closed, the system will increase in internal disorder and die.

Insufficient liaison and coalition between the major subsystems may dampened the feedback mechanism. It also

weakened the decider subsystem's ability to regulate the functioning of the system. Decider/feedback circuits may be likened to a thermostate. If the controls are set too narrowly, overcontrol may result in inefficiency where the decider overfunctions and where other subsystems are not free to function optimally. If however, they are set too broadly, resulting in undercontrol, the entire system including the decider will function improperly.

Above all, malfunction from the Christian perspective is ultimately defined by the dynamic faith relation with God. This relationship with God leads us to probe into the implicit assumptions of the individual family which is called the worldview in this thesis.

### Worldview

In this section only the elements that are pertinent for the discussion of this thesis will be explained.

According to Charles Kraft, worldview has five major functions (1979:54-56).

1. Explanatory: worldview explains why and how things got to be as they are and why and how they construe or change.
2. Evaluational: worldview sanctions the goal, values, institutions of a society giving people the impression that their approach to life is valid. At the same time, it provides them with a means for evaluating all outside influence, activities and attitude within the society.