# **Cybernetics and Social Construction: A Critical Review**

Without a doubt, the concept of family and family life has experienced changes and upheavals. In many countries in the West, approximately 40% of families end up breaking. Some are even choosing to stay single, and there are growing variations such as one parent families and homosexuals. There is also increasing diversity in expectations such that child care is a responsibility of both parents. The role of breadwinning is currently not a reserve of man. Women, even though are expected to contribute to the bread basket still have the bulk of the domestic chores. It is therefore not hard to state that the family is in crisis. These current dynamics in the context of the household can better be understood through the application of system understanding in family therapy development.

The motivation behind the development of early psychological theories was the need to understand human behavior. Freud is some of the early psychologists that dedicated their lives to inquiry and development of theories. Most of these theories have persisted over time and form the basis for current research.

## Historical Foundations in Family Therapy

To comprehend the philosophical underpinnings of family therapy, it is crucial first to understand the earlier psychological techniques to work with families. The central idea at the root of family therapy is that the family is a unit, mostly interactive, and impacted by past generations. It functions by a set of coalescing principles and the notion that the whole is more important than the totality of its parts. The growth of family therapy can be traced back to the development of relevant approaches and theories by psychologists Freud, Adler and Bowen among others. However, it is those ideas of Bowen that have persisted and have formed the basis for the family therapy process.

It was during the 18th century that real progress was seen in terms of looking to reason as a primary authority in solving human problems. The 18th-century romanticism made an effort to pool the emotional sense of the world with rationalism from earlier ages (Berlin & Hardy, 2013). During this period, the actual impacts of situations and practical consequences were critical elements in uncovering the truth. In a practical sense, positivistic thinking had real value at the time. The traditional timeframe psychology theoretical underpinnings focused on the unconscious (Roth & Fonagy, 2013). At the time, psychiatry was more important than psychology. Family therapy did not exist on its own.

Freud is credited with laying the foundation for psychotherapy. Essentially, Freud’s psychotherapy combined biological psychiatry and psychodynamic theory (Gabbard, 2000). In that context, pathology was an important factor in psychotherapy. Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic therapy emerged as the first clinical and philosophical grasp of individuals' problems. The basis for this theory was ego, superego, the ID, personal development and the unconscious (Mitchell & Black, 2016). Freud’s approach was the basis for psychology in its initial years. However, Alfred Adler’s individual psychology emerged as a timeless concept and a significant contribution to family therapy.

Adler's theory's primary focus was on less traditional methods often referred to as postmodernism. Some of the basic assumptions underlying Individual Psychology include the idea that individuals have a subjective perspective on reality. They have exceptional ways of looking at their world, and to understand them, one must do it within their context (Corey, 2005). During this early time, psychology was more of individuals. However, Adler was not afraid to branch out to the family – an unchartered territory. Even though Freud contributed significantly to the field of psychology, it was Adler who was the first to work primarily with the families publicly (Corey, 2005). His primary objective was to educate people in the community and help them overcome the problems they were facing.

## Cybernetics

Cybernetics, as a term, was coined by Norbert Wiener as a title of his book produced in 1948 (Andrew, 2013). Weiner provided the definition of the phrase as communication and control in the machine and animal. The term comes from the Greek word ‘Kybernetes' used to refer to the ship's steersman. However, historians have come across the prior use of the term in the 19th-century records of Clerk Maxwell, a British scientist among others (Gao, 2014). The ideas of cybernetics in the context of communication and feedback parallel mechanical processes. An ideal example is a thermostat that utilizes the negative feedback to keep up a constant temperature at any given time. In the same way, the negative feedback can be used to regulate dynamics within the family unit. Inputs into the family systems cause reactions whose aim is serving and control (Corey, 2005).

The real basis for the cybernetics theory is the general systems theory. Mostly, the general systems theory emerged following WW2 under the stewardship of Ludwig von Bertalanffy (Adams et al., 2014). The systems theory incorporated all disciplines and were the basis for explaining organizations – both mechanical and inanimate. One of the main ideas behind the systems theory is that by conducting an analysis of the individual parts, the entire system can be understood. This notion finds application in family therapy where learning the different parts of the family provides sufficient insight into understanding it as a unit.

The roots of cybernetics are useful to all systems. However, in a psychosocial application, cybernetics is a compelling framework for describing, evaluating and analyzing the behavior of individuals, as well as the factors that serve to control this behavior.

The cybernetics model in family therapy defines how systems are monitored and the manner in which feedback loops function (Barnett, 2005). According to this model, symptoms are a way of keeping the family in balance. The first order cybernetics, also referred to as modernism, provided insights into the functioning of families. From the modernist perspective, truth consists of deductible and observable facts (Barnett, 2005). Using this view, the therapist is an outside observer that conducts an analysis of the patterns of behavior recommending solutions based on the observations. However, it is significant to note that the therapists must be outside the family system to make objective observations and influence its mechanics.

Second order cybernetics is quite the opposite of what first-order cybernetics is all about. The contrast between the systems was best underscored by Heinz von Foerster. Foerster, whose efforts pioneered the new direction, contends that the first order is about observed systems (Schwaninger, 2009). The second is on observing the systems. Until the late 20th century, therapists were encouraged to be silent, neutral and distant in terms of emotions. They were trained to view themselves as powerful authorities in the analysis of the unconscious mind. In contrast to first-order cybernetics therapists that stood outside the system, the second order therapists must include themselves as part of the change process. They do not influence the system from outside.

This revolutionary shift in perspective was inspired by Valera and Maturana in the 1980s (Froese, 2010). However, the second order perspective expanded from the earlier view but sees the analyst as part of the organization. According to the latter order supporters, information is processed internally, and so the outputs include pieces of themselves filtered through their psyche. This challenge to the first order was a challenge and the second order found a footing in family therapy. Instead of the earlier procedure where the therapist sat a distance away from the client, the new order therapist took a seat together with them navigating the process rather than playing the role of a steersman.

## Social Construction

The idea of constructivism arose out of second order cybernetics. Social constructionism may be defined as the view which considers that a substantial part of people’s lives is the way it is as a result of interpersonal and social impacts (Barnett, 2005). Even though genetic factors are also at work, the theory chooses to focus on collective and social implications. Social constructionism holds that all characteristics of humankind are shaped except the developmental and inherited aspects (Barnett, 2005). Through cognitive processes, every person builds their experiences.

Theorists leaning more on social constructionism rejected the notion of analytic treatment as it is ineffective in extracting the objective truth. They contend that therapeutic narratives are co-created in a bi-directional, dialogic and reciprocal process (Barnett, 2005). In that context, the therapist is an important part of the process and not just an observer. Using social constructionism, the boundaries between the client and therapist are supposed to be permeable and flexible. In the postmodernist perspective, the role of the therapist and how they see the family changed. Therapists act according to the manner that patients wish to live their lives (Schames 2013). In other words, they are the steersmen of their lives, and the therapist is only there to guide them in their decisions.

## Concepts and Methods

Throughout the development of family therapy, several approaches and concepts have emerged. In cybernetics, a concept by the name familial homeostasis emerged. The idea of homeostasis was initially started in 1865 by Claude Bernard (Kim & Rose, 2014). In particular, the term was used to define the organic systems features whereby a physiological state or static chemical is upheld by a complicated interaction of dynamic forces. Don Jackson, a psychiatrist, introduced the concept to family science in 1951 (Ray, 2007). The new family therapy model incorporated the communications theory with homeostatic concept successfully.

In maintaining homeostasis, feedback loops are critical. These self-correcting processes try to correct deviations regardless of whether the system was functioning appropriately or not (Barnett, 2005). This describes a negative feedback loop as the primary objective is to push the dynamics of the family to its original state. This compares to how a thermostat maintains a particular temperature. In contrast, positive feedback loops do not return the family dynamics back to the set point but respond in a manner relating to growth.

A perfect example of these concepts at work is when a child is born in a family. This new addition to the family together with the mother going back to work brings new dynamics to the family. The husband may feel emotionally neglected, and as a result, the wife may feel guilty. The negative feedback loop in such a situation is when she chooses to resign from her job. This may be an attempt to give more attention to the husband and return to the original state. However, the positive feedback loop and communication lead to adaptations to accept the change. The husband may be made to reduce expectations, or the wife may make compromises to establish a new set point.

A double bind is another concept that developed in cybernetics. Double bind occurs where there are two levels of conflicting messages (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). In most cases, it applies to the parent and child. The real definition of a double bind is when a child gets repeated injunctions from their guardian. In the exchange, the adult would give primary injunction followed by another one more conflicting such as a hug. The parent may also issue a warning to the child to make sure they do according to what they want.

Epistemology is an important term in social constructionist perspective. In actual sense, the term has been interpreted differently by different authors depending on their orientation. Auerswald defined the term as a set of rules utilized in thought by a huge group of individuals to define reality (Stanton, 2009). For Keeney, epistemology is the basis for cognition and action. Simply, the term describes the rules that individuals utilize to make sense of their life.

Michael White is credited with popularizing the term epistemology in psychology (Stanton, 2009). Individual narratives that individuals create are critical, and White believed that they help create an identity. Language – the basis for narratives – can shape lives, as well as issues and problems. Utilizing the narrative theory, the therapist can help the individual make alterations to their story for the better. Patients can be helped to develop new points regarding their lives. In actual sense, the constructed narratives can be potent devices in disbanding dysfunctional patterns that serve to support such issues as anger and resentment.

## Social Justice

Social construction and cybernetics contrast sharply in terms of the social influences that approach allows. Cybernetics is inflexible and more imposing. The perspective provides a one way of doing things in family dynamics. As a matter of fact, this approach ignores compelling factors to the family dynamics such as socioeconomic, race, and politics that can contribute to family failure. On the other hand, the social construction point of view is more embracing. It incorporates these forces providing adequate solutions to individuals.

Failure to address the cultural factors can make the therapeutic process unsuccessful as the real issues will not be resolved. Cybernetics does not recognize these dynamics, and this may leave the patient unfulfilled; feeling that their problems have not been addressed. The therapist must recognize these cultural factors and their influence on family dynamics so they can address them effectively.

## Conclusion

Cybernetics and social constructionism have moved the therapist from taking the observer role to being active participants in the therapeutic process. Social construction is more recent and significantly differs from cybernetics. In the former, the therapist is more involved in therapy sessions and is a component of the family dynamic. They offer themselves to the process and leave a part of themselves with the individuals seeking help. Cybernetics as a concept can best be comprehended from the perspective of general systems and the study of systems in general.

The historical foundations that led to the development of the two approaches to family therapy have far-reaching influences in family science. Having an understanding of the theories, where they come from and their development through the years is critical in obtaining a deeper understanding of family therapy and appreciating the practice.

## Reflective Summary

The two different approaches provide me as a learning counselor with an alternative. More importantly, cybernetics and social construction offer a differing view of family therapy, and that is beneficial in a way. In a real sense, I gain more insight into the field. The ideas of early therapists act as a guide in the practice of family therapy.

It is important to appreciate the contribution of each framework in the development of family therapy. Even though contradictory at times, each has contributed to the effective development of therapeutic practice. In other words, each framework contributes meaningfully to the understanding of human behavior. Contemporary therapists must grapple through this contributions and incorporate ideas in beneficial ways for self-aware, intentional and efficient practice. The different perspectives help me as future therapist understand some of the shortcomings of each approach and the value of taking into account the cultural factors. The goal is to be successful in the field and having all necessary information is a step in the right direction.

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