

**INTRODUCTION**  
**SPECIAL ISSUE: THE USE OF EMOTIONS IN**  
**COUPLES AND FAMILY THERAPY**

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Systemic therapies have been accused of being impersonal, mechanistic, and detached, of focusing on patterns of interaction from a neutral distance, rather than on the realities of the lives lived by the clients who come for help.

The individual and personal experience seems to have disappeared into the "systemic stew" (Merkel & Searight, 1992). Models of family intervention have often suffered from "conceptual obscurity" (Bednar, Burlingame & Masters, 1988). They have become abstract and obsessed with epistemology, rather than producing user-friendly, systematic guides to interventions that clients perceive as relevant and meaningful. The desire to modify interactive patterns has perhaps made systems therapists wary of connecting with individual realities, wary of losing the view of the whole in the particular—of becoming caught in one particular, biased individual view of reality.

However, every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing and this is as true of systems theorists as anyone else. A focus on interactions has marginalized inner realities. Systems theory, however, has a philosophical commitment to wholeness, to seeing how things fit together and influence each other. In systems theory nothing stands alone. There is always a context. Precisely because systems theory focuses on process, on the organization between elements in a system, it can be argued that it is, in fact, uniquely suited to dealing with the interaction of inner and outer elements and multifaceted realities that constitute intimate relationships.

The point of view taken in this special edition is that systems theory not only can but is particularly suited for capturing such multifaceted realities. It is able to capture the whole dance that is a relationship. This includes the dancer's impetus to move in a particular way, the passion in the step, the step itself, the meaning it conveys, the predictable responses of the other partner to particular steps, and the way a series of reciprocal moves fit together to make up the dance that defines the relationship between the dancers. More specifically, systems theory can and should encompass what Bertalanffy (1968) calls the leading

organizing elements of a system. This involves not just the external rules of the relationship that influence interactional responses but the leading internal elements. In the case of interdependent relationships, emotion is the leading element that organizes responses to significant others and one that has been largely ignored in systemic interventions.

In 1969, Jay Haley published the book, *The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ*, where he described a client in a psychiatric facility completing a Rorschach test for a psychologist. The psychologist is distant and "professional" and is using the test to judge who the client is and how competent he is as a person. Haley shows how the context, the relationship between the client and the psychologist, and in particular the power imbalance, accounts for the client's silence and unwillingness to respond to the test. This silence, however, is interpreted by the psychologist as a sign of intrapsychic dysfunction. Haley's point is compelling; social context provides meaning and elicits behavior. This special edition was primed by the idea that the client's fear, his emotional response, also organized his actions in this situation. To leave this out is to ignore a key organizing element in the drama that unfolded. Ignoring the client's fear eschews the multi-dimensional reality of many interacting elements that systems theory espouses. To disregard this is to move toward systemic determinism, where the "needs of the system" govern what occurs. This kind of determinism is similar to the intrapsychic determinism that systems theorists rebelled against. The individual is then viewed as a cog in a machine and inner experience is irrelevant, as if the client in the story could not formulate and express his fears and so influence the rules of the interaction with the psychologist. Emotional expression might enable the client to change his stance with the psychologist, and might also move the psychologist to respond differently.

When systems theorists have dealt with inner realities, they have mostly dealt with behavior and cognition, although cognitions have often been assigned to the group—as in family epistemologies and family myths. In this edition, the focus is on emotion. Emotion in particular bridges the boundary of within and between. Emotion communicates to others and organizes the self for action. Emotional expression organizes and defines close relationships. The authors suggest that it thus makes sense to address emotion and to use the power of emotion in therapies that attempt to change relationships.

Emotional responses also ground us. They tell us in a compelling way what we want and need, and they command us to act, so we run when we are afraid. Emotions can be overwhelming and sometimes difficult to handle, but without them, as therapists and as people, we can become lost in an abstract impersonal realm where we do not know what matters to us, where one construction of reality is as good as another, and one theory of change is as good as another. Addressing emotion and how it organizes interactions gives therapists a touchstone, a place to stand in constantly shifting contexts. The emotional realities of clients can be a touchstone for therapists that can help us to practice in a collabo-

rative, systematic manner to transform the interpersonal dramas that construct our client's reality and sense of who they are. Gergen (1994) states that, emotions do not "have an impact" on social life; they constitute social life itself. It would then seem crucial that therapies dealing with social interaction learn to address rather than avoid or discount emotion.

Contributors to this special edition include Guy Diamond and Lynne Siqueland from the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, and Roger Kobak from the University of Delaware. These authors share an attachment perspective on family relationships. Alan Parry from the University of Calgary addresses emotion in narrative approaches and Eric King from the Hincks Institute in Toronto considers emotion from the solution focused perspective. Bill Pinsof from the Family Institute and Northwestern University and Brent Atkinson from Northern Illinois University present an experiential perspective on changing systems, as do the editors of this volume, Sue Johnson and Les Greenberg.

The aim of this edition is to provide conceptual links and specific interventions that integrate emotion into systemic thought and practice, adding a new and vital piece to the systemic picture. It is interesting to note that four of the contributors focus on attachment, on issues of connection rather than power. For family therapists who are less concerned with power dynamics and more concerned with creating bonding and connection, it is particularly obvious that emotion is not just part of the problem in distressed relationships, it is also part of the solution.

## References

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