

Practising Purposefully

SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

What is Systemic Practice?

What is it?

A **systemic viewpoint** sees individuals as belonging to 'systems'. By system we just mean lots of inter-related, inter-dependent parts working together as a whole, all influencing each other. If we take a family system for example, the individuals within this system are influenced by their shared beliefs and expectations around behaviour and communication. Systemic practice sees all behaviour as a communication to others. They seek to find meaning to behaviour.



How we view problems

The traditional way of viewing problems has been that they are located *within* the individual, (i.e. the person is depressed due to a hormone imbalance in their brain). It assumes that there is a cause and also a solution as a result of knowing what the cause is. This way of viewing problems is very 'medical' based (i.e. depression means antidepressants should be prescribed). Systemic workers do not think of the problem as belonging solely to the individual but reflect on how the individual experiences the problem *within* the relationships they are in (so the person *shows* depression more in some areas of their life than others).



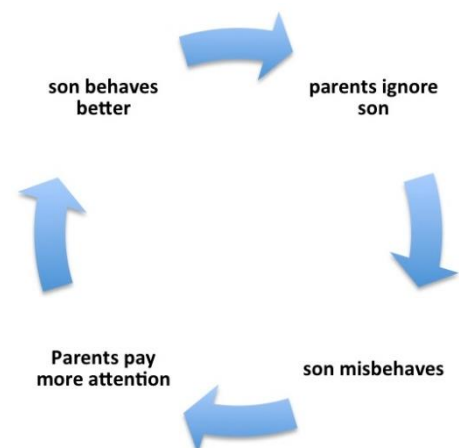
In this regard all behaviour (and problems) are seen in the **context** of which they are displayed and/or observed. So problems are not in the individual, they are in the system. The 'problem' is how we view the problem per se. Who decides what a problem is? Who is it a problem for? We are

confined in our thinking based on our socialisation and adherence to cultural norms, for example, something that may be a problem in the UK is not a problem in other countries and vice versa.

Patterns of behaviour

Systemic practices encourage people to try not to see things as linear in that $A=B$ but rather that we should see things as **circular** ($A=B=A$). Things are never as simple as $A=B$ as there are always multiple factors in operation, such as someone's beliefs, values, history, thoughts etc all guiding behaviour and communication. If we view the world in this way we can then become more aware of **behavioural patterns** – so if person A always says X, person B usually responds with Y.

Patterns of behaviour can create and sustain problems. The people involved then attribute meanings to the problem e.g. "they are depressed because...." Meanings are not always



interpreted in the ways they are intended though. The person may feel blamed for the problem, and resulting shame and guilt may be worse than the presenting problem in the first place. We need to be exploring the effect the problem has on everyone in the system i.e. *“it makes me frustrated when that person acts like that”* and then explore everyone’s reaction to the problem and how that impacts on others *“when person X is mean to person Y it makes me feel...”*

How to help with problems

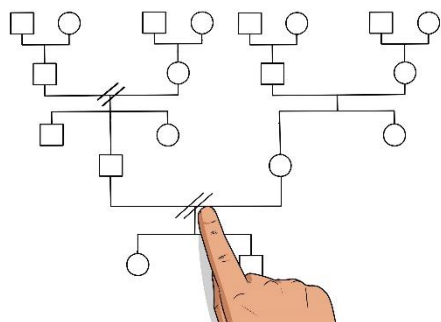
With regards to helping people with dysfunctional patterns, the systemic worker must try and create a context for change. This is best achieved through a trusting, supportive and non-blaming **relationship**, in which helpful conversations can take place.

The worker should occupy a position of **curiosity** and should not seek to understand the family too quickly but ask **questions** to help discover the patterns which are present in the family and link these to meaning, feeling and behaviour seen.



Making this explicit to family members allows them to recognise that they need to do things differently. Indeed, it gives them options and choices when they may have felt ‘stuck’ before. The workers role is to help facilitate the family to find new ways of communicating whether through words or body language. Once the family/individual is aware of their patterns of behaviour, the family/individual is able to self-monitor these thoughts and behaviour and therefore change is more sustainable.

Tools used in systemic practice



Systemic workers use a range of tools to explore the family relationships as well as unpicking patterns of behaviour. Perhaps the most well-known tool is the **family genogram** (like a family tree) and the **ecomap**. These tools help map important relationships. They can be used to examine the working structures within the family, to explore where power and control is located and to notice patterns throughout the generations. There are multiple approaches within Systemic Practice which utilise different tools based on their views of what creates and maintains problem. For example, a narrative approach believes problems are maintained by problem-saturated stories and thus seeks to help the person re-author these stories through a variety of techniques.

In summary:

Systemic practice is all about relationships; about viewing behaviour in the context of which it occurred – this includes examining meanings and beliefs about the behaviour. All behaviour is seen as a communication so unpicking this and making patterns of behaviour explicit to family members aids them to do something different and make positive changes.