

Developments in applications of systemic theory and practice over 50 years of Systemic Family Therapy

Invited Plenary presentation

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Family therapy was launched from the early work of Gregory Bateson and others in the Hixon Symposia and then adopted a General System perspective. This paper charts some of the pathways taken by Systemic Family and Couples Therapy (SFCT) during the last 50 years, reviews current developments and invites consideration of developments in other areas of systemic theory and application that would benefit SFCT. In the process I will offer stages from my own erratic thread through these developments, through theories of contingency, causal attribution, schemas, and attachment to practice in reflexive learning and developing a self-report measure of family functioning.

Early models of SFT included the strategic in which the therapist determines the systemic dysfunction and creates conditions that prevent the family from continuing with it, and the more collaborative structural with its focus on communicational and other boundaries, and triangulations. Major advances in the 1980s include 'Milan systemic', Murray Bowen's Systemic Family Therapy and Maturana's structurally determined systems. In Europe at least the field became resistant to explanations involving causality and there was a move to regarding the family as the only expert on its functioning. Meanwhile the focus on families as linguistic systems opened up to external influences from such as Bakhtin, Vygotsky, Foucault and Derrida focussed attention on wider systemic influences. Current developments cluster around an integration of systemic with attachment approaches, the 'open dialogue' movement and 'relational reflexivity'. Concerns have returned to wider systems and in particular Government and Health concerns with evidence-based provision, monetisation, and well-being.