

# Recognizing the Limits of Systems Concepts: Paradigm Warfare Versus Integration

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A continuing ambition of many who study families is that the social or "soft" sciences eventually will reach maturity and become unified under some comprehensive conceptual framework similar to the natural or "hard" sciences. Although never stated explicitly, Roberts (the preceding article) assumes this stance in the process of asserting that a systems framework conceptualizes parent-child relations (or parenting) more effectively than such alternative perspectives as the behavioral and Adlerian orientations.

While Roberts has provided some useful applications of systems concepts to the parent-child relationship, his enthusiasm for the chosen perspective translates into excessive emphasis on its strengths, but little attention to its weaknesses. The result is that the Roberts' paper represents another problematic attempt to boost the stock of one framework by undermining the assets of its competitors. Thus, in my opinion, Roberts errs by engaging in "paradigm warfare" that exaggerates the benefits of a systems approach without sufficient recognition of its limitations. Based on these general comments, there are several specific points that I wish to underscore.

1. Roberts seeks to establish the superiority of systems theory by contrasting this perspective with two alternative theoretical orientations, the Adlerian and the behavioral perspectives. Unfortunately, he seems to select these frameworks as comparative mechanisms simply because each provides an applied parenting program that is supposed to be a good representation of either the behavioral or Adlerian perspective. By doing so, however, Roberts establishes fairly easy criteria (or "straw theories") in reference to which systems theory is compared and his claims of superiority are asserted.

A more challenging task for Roberts, in turn, would have been to demonstrate the superiority of systems concepts in reference to existing bodies of empirical knowledge about parent-child relations rather than popular parenting programs (see Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Peterson & Leigh, 1990; Peterson & Rollins, 1987; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). The Adlerian perspective that Roberts chooses, for example, is a boiled-down

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version of neo-psychoanalysis (Dreikurs and the S.T.E.P. program) that lacks a substantial body of empirical verification. Furthermore, his criticisms of the "behavioral perspective" tend to be leveled at a much simplified and somewhat dated version of Gerald Patterson's (1975) work represented in the applied book,

*Families: Applications of Social Learning to Family Life*

A more equitable and challenging comparison would have been to use Patterson's (1982, 1986,) more sophisticated and recent work on coercive home environments which is more reciprocal in its conception, more systemic in nature, and a much tougher comparison. Consequently, in contrast to our current scientific knowledge about parent-child relations, Roberts chooses an easy path to establish the "credibility" of a systems view of childrearing.

2. Another issue is that Roberts compares "apples to oranges" by committing level of analysis violations. Although a primary goal is to demonstrate how systems concepts can be used to describe the family context of parent-child relationships, he chooses two perspectives for comparison having their historic roots in psychology. Both of these frameworks, in turn, focus on the individual and dyadic levels of the family system and, thus, by historical origin and intent are less likely to deal with "whole families." Consequently, because these "straw theories" do not focus primarily on the entire family, Roberts selects a strategy that stacks the deck in favor of a systems orientation.

A more thoughtful analysis would have been to recognize that each level of the family system (individual, dyadic, family system) may have unique issues requiring both psychological and systemic understanding and interventions that are capable of complementing each other (Cromwell & Peterson, 1983; Peterson & Cromwell, 1983). More appropriate contrasts also would involve comparisons between systems theory and other *family* conceptual frameworks such as the family developmental, symbolic interactional, and exchange perspectives. Unfortunately, these frameworks do not provide simplified parenting programs as convenient mechanisms for making the favored perspective fare so well.

3. Ironically, the very ideas that Roberts chooses to conceptualize the parent-child relationship also illustrate the excessive generality and imprecision that often is alleged to be a problematic feature of systems concepts. For example, in the case illustration on parenting pre-school children, Roberts recommends such vague interventions as the "need to establish and maintain generational boundaries between parents, children, and grandparents," while criticizing more specific recommendations by behaviorists to change parental behavior (i.e., through rewards and punishments) and the Adlerian's tendency to ignore the misbehavior of

children. A similar problem occurs in the case example on school-age parenting in which Roberts proposes that efforts to remediate the problem of a "hierarchical imbalance" should involve the "need to unite as parents." My primary concern here is that, other than such vague recommendations as the couple should "move across town" and "define a grandmother role," Roberts does not provide concrete indicators of such systems concepts as the establishment of "generational boundaries."

Unfortunately, the inability to translate such abstract ideas into concrete recommendations can suggest only that systems concepts are either too general for specific intervention implications or are developed superficially by Roberts. Whether or not either is the case, the hazy illustrations provided by Roberts can serve only to reinforce the allegations that systems orientations are plagued by obscure concepts and imprecise interpretations which hinder scientific investigation and intervention (Berscheid, 1986). Especially in the case of applied parenting programs where specific intervention strategies are necessary, any effort to establish the credibility of a systems approach will require greater attention to detail than Roberts provides.

4. A related difficulty is that while Roberts fails to be precise in his own recommendations, he also criticizes the greater detail provided in other perspectives by arguing that the "overuse of [childrearing] techniques is harmful on parenting." the logic used here, in turn, seems too restrictive because one can imagine scenarios in which childrearing techniques might be taught within a systems orientation as one means of structuring a "unified parenting strategy." Instead of contradicting a systems orientation, therefore, the practice of teaching parents to be rewarding, consistent, firm, rational, and to apply logical consequences might accomplish exactly what a systems interventionist would recommend--that is, establish "clear generational boundaries" through which parents act in unison with more authoritative, yet responsive relationship skills. Such a strategy, of course, also would require interventions that address the reciprocal behavior of children and other aspects of the family system.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that a more productive approach would be to seek integration across perspectives rather than arguing that one framework is better than others (i.e., paradigm warfare). As Sprey (1988) recently has argued, some of the most important "unfinished business" of the family field is to seek the "integration of existing conceptual schemes into broader, more flexible vocabularies. One reason why this has not yet occurred, however, are the erroneous beliefs that most existing conceptual frameworks--like Kuhn's paradigms--are epistemologically incompatible and can develop only by replacing rather than incorporating rivals" (p. 881). In fact, as Sprey (1988) also suggests, most family frameworks already include "systemic" ideas that allow such integration to occur. In support of this logic, for example, I see no reason why

behavioral ideas (especially those incorporated into contemporary exchange theory) cannot be compatible with systemic ideas. This is especially true with the growth of efforts to apply these concepts to relationships beyond the dyad and to reciprocal rather than unidirectional conceptions of social interaction (Ekeh, 1974; Nye, 1982). Furthermore, functional family therapy is a recent approach that applies a combination of behavioral and systems concepts to families with adolescents (Alexander & Parsons, 1982).

Perhaps the first step toward such integrative efforts would be to recognize that no single framework exists which provides a comprehensive or "best way" of viewing either parent-child relationships or entire families. Instead, many frameworks have distinct areas of specialization to which each is best suited for capturing particular aspects of family realities (Peterson, 1986). Consequently, we must learn to systematically pick and choose the most useful components of various frameworks as a basis to begin the challenging process of integration.

Although I disagree with Roberts' "my theory is tougher than your theory" strategy, I do concur that systems perspectives can provide us with many useful insights about parenting. Certainly, its greatest asset (as Roberts suggests) is the capacity to conceptualize parent-child issues in terms of the larger family context rather than either specific aspects of the parent-child relationship (the dyadic level) or the psychological experiences of parents and children (the individual level). As such, a systems orientation seems especially suited for mapping the broad contours of family relationships and reminding us not to limit our interventions to parents or other individuals within families. As yet, however, systems approaches have not provided us with an extensive body of empirically based knowledge that is comparable to either the behavioral perspective on childrearing or the larger body of empirical research on parenting (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Peterson, 1982; Peterson & Rollins, 1987). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Olson, 1986; Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, & Wilson, 1983), much of our "systems knowledge" continues to be based on clinical research and thoughtful impressions derived from the "art of therapy" which, nonetheless, lack the scientific rigor of other approaches (e.g., the behavioral orientation). Furthermore, as Roberts' paper illustrates, a systems approach may not translate into a parsimonious set of empirically based parenting skills that easily generalize to a variety of circumstances.

By underscoring the lack of precision and the "empirical softness" of our systems knowledge (Berscheid, 1986), however, I am not taking the "hardline" position that family science can be legitimate only when a rigidly positivistic science is practiced. Certainly, some of the most compelling gestures of systems theory involve the complexities it adds by confronting the traditional scientific assumptions of reductionism and unidirectional causality.

Rather than endless paradigm wars, however, a major challenge for family scientists is to engage in the worthy task of seeking to reassess and integrate our various

images of the family world, with systems orientations being some of our most valuable sources of ideas. Such a strategy would require that we reassess how family perspectives can be complementary with psychological perspectives (i.e., the individual level of analysis), rather than engaging in needless "apples to oranges" warfare involving inappropriate comparisons across levels of analysis.

The examination of such issues is possible because systems orientations recognize the existence of partially distinct levels of social organization that are separated by boundaries within families (i.e., the individual, dyadic, and whole system levels) (Cromwell & Peterson, 1983; Minuchin, 1974; Peterson & Cromwell, 1983). Such a strategy, in turn, seems preferable to engaging in misleading comparisons in which family level concepts are said to provide better insights than either the individual or dyadic levels of analysis.

Based on the generalities that Roberts offers, therefore, I doubt seriously that scholars and interventionists who are concerned with either individual (i.e., psychological) or dyadic (i.e., parent-child, marital, and sibling subsystems) issues will throw up their hands and surrender to a family systems viewpoint (i.e., the "whole family" system). In short, if one's goal is to *replace* a particular approach with another, then the new alternative necessarily must chart a course that demonstrates at least equal or better precision. It seems clear, however, that Roberts' approach has failed to accomplish this goal and that a more useful strategy would be to seek complementarity rather than antagonism between perspectives. Unless we find alternative strategies to the "factional warfare" between competing "world views," I fear that the social sciences (and more specifically the family field) will remain the "Beirut of theorizing" in which chaos prevails and limited progress is made.

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