

Recognizing the Strengths of Systemic Parenting: Paradigm Shift in Parent-Child Relationships

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Peterson's (1990) response to my article, "A Systems Perspective of Parenting: The Family's Responsibility in Misbehaving" was encouraging. He states that "systems perspectives can provide us with many useful insights about parenting." He also states that "the most compelling feature of systems theory involves the complexities it adds by confronting the traditional scientific assumptions of reductionism and unidirectional causality." In this latter statement, he has captured the purpose of my article. I am encouraged by his belief that systems theory fares so well in comparison with both behavioral and Adlerian theories of parenting.

Peterson gives me far too much credit when he states that I "created straw theories" in order to easily defeat them. My intention was to compare a systems approach of parenting with two formidable theories which have received extensive development in the parenting literature, both in theory and in application through parent education programs. I believe that it is important to compare the systems perspective of parenting with theories that have been widely accepted in the literature and in practical application.

Throughout his paper, Peterson uses the term "paradigm warfare" to refer to my critique of behavioral and Adlerian parenting strategies. In fact, he accuses me of creating a "Beirut of theorizing," causing "factional warfare," and engaging in "antagonisms." In all fairness to Peterson, I have re-read my article a number of times, and I fail to find one statement in my article which is guilty of paradigm warfare. On the contrary, I believe that my article achieves what Peterson states is the purpose of a systems perspective, i.e., to "confront reductionistic and unidirectional causality."

I would also challenge Peterson to critique his response with the same standard that he analyzed my article. For example, he states that Adlerian parenting as developed by Dreikurs and the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting program (STEP) are "boiled-down versions of neo-psychoanalysis." By his own standard, this statement would not only be characterized as paradigm warfare, but could be properly classified as "paradigm annihilation". While I am not an Adlerian as my article indicates, I believe that the Adlerian position makes a unique contribution to psychology in general and parenting in particular. Furthermore, labeling Adlerians as neo-psychoanalysts does not serve the purpose of "complementarily" and "integrating" of theories which Peterson says is needed.

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I was left somewhat confused by Peterson's position on the emerging of paradigms. On the one hand, he states that it is erroneous to assume that Kuhn (1970) believed that existing paradigms are incompatible and must compete with one another. In taking this position he is being critical of what he assumes is my position that paradigms should compete with one another. On the other hand, however, he criticizes me for not being rigorous enough in a Kuhnian sense of establishing empirical verification for my position. In the second regard, I suggest he re-read Kuhn (1970). In referring to my position in reference to Kuhn's belief that a new paradigm must seem better than its competitors, he apparently did not read Kuhn's entire sentence. That sentence reads that a new paradigm must "seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it is confronted." (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 17-18). In fact, the match between the empirical verification and the paradigm's predictions occur after the new paradigm has reached a "normal science" position, not before such a status is reached. My article assumes that a normal science state has not been reached in reference to parenting from a systems position. More accurately, the article is confronting or questioning of still dominant paradigms in parenting.

In saying that my article compares apples to oranges by comparing a systems perspective of parenting with two perspectives that have "their historic roots in psychology," Peterson has misunderstood the purpose of this article, namely, to confront reductionistic and linear perspectives in parenting. His suggestion that I compare family developmental, symbolic interaction, and exchange perspectives with a systems perspective reflects lack of comprehension of significant points made in the paper. A re-reading of my article should help Peterson recognize that a family developmental perspective is integrated throughout the paper. While he is correct in assuming that symbolic interaction and exchange perspectives may be more similar to a systems perspective than behavioral or Adlerian perspectives, neither has been developed as a parenting paradigm. There is much in symbolic interaction theory to compliment a systems perspective of parenting but, contrary to Peterson's suggestion, these perspectives should be integrated rather than pitted against one another.

When Peterson suggests that my article recommends vague interventions and represents excessive generalities, I would agree in the sense that a systems perspective of parenting is not a "cookbook" approach to parenting. A basic assumption by both Adlerian and behavioral positions in parenting is that parents socialize a child into appropriate behavior. Both models teach parents specific techniques for handling common child misbehavior. Teaching parents specific techniques for such child misbehaviors as temper tantrums, dawdling, refusal to comply, and other such annoyances ignore the social context in which those behaviors are embedded. While a systems perspective would concur that the family, particularly the parents, are the primary socializers of their children, the larger social network including peers, school, social, and cultural expectations must be included in parent education. Parent education models that ignore the reciprocal interaction of a child with parents and the larger social network are reductionistic.

My article suggests that in contrast to popular parent education models, a model for improved parent-child relations might be more accurately described as "family education model of parenting." Such a model would avoid common difficulties with

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current parent education models, including both behavioral and Adlerian (Cagan 1980; Hills & Knowles, 1987), which tend to be engaged in a prearranged program of parenting. Using behavioral and Adlerian techniques, the parents' inability to function at the desired level in following the techniques advised, can create more frustration, inconsistency, and disappointment with parenting than before attempting to use such techniques (Cagan, 1980). The successes in using a behavioral approach (O'Dell, 1974) do not consider change in the family unit or in the way members interact. The primary unit of change is only in the child's behavior. There appears to be evidence that little transfer of skills taught to parents in parent education programs carry over to family situations (Hills & Knowles, 1987). Consequently, there is a need for parent education that involves family, cultural, and social dimensions.

A family education model for parenting would focus on the reciprocal relations among all family members. In contrast to therapists who warn against openly discussing systems principles with families, a family education model of parenting would begin with some didactic understanding of how individuals function in families. Family members would be introduced to such systems terms as hierarchy, boundaries, coalitions, cross-generational alliances and family power. Family members would be given examples of how each of these concepts operate in the family and would be helped in applying their own family's situation and dynamics in a systems perspective. Family members would also learn about the family life cycle, in addition to individual, cognitive, and developmental issues. Particular problematic behavior in the family, i.e., misbehavior of a child, would be viewed by family members in terms of the overall family dynamics.

Such a model of parent education would be a drastic improvement over reductionistic models which are little more than cookbook approaches based on a theoretical perspective. In fact, it has been suggested that parents would perform more adequately from knowledge of child development than the behavioral or Adlerian cookbook approaches (Griffone, 1980). A family education model of parenting would underscore that parent-child relationships are complex and bi-directional. Furthermore, both parents and their children will have more knowledge about how families operate and how their specific family problem, i.e., the misbehavior of the child, can be changed. This model relies on the understanding that the responsibility for behavior within a family is reciprocal regardless of the identified problem member.

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