

## System –therapeutic view of the experience and behavior in children and adolescents

H.-W. Gessmann

International Centre of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Aichach 86551, Germany

**Abstract.** The essay begins with the statement that there are no disturbances in the experience or behavior of children and adolescents. An explanation follows. It leads to systemic thinking. Further principles of systems therapy thinking are introduced: systems (phenomena, people ...) are never isolated, but are always viewed in the context of their environment (this is a young person in a relationship system); systems are in exchange with their environment and adapt to their environment (here we are talking about the adolescent's adaptation to the relationship system); systems can be viewed as constructions for understanding reality and are therefore dependent on the viewer and must not be viewed as "reality". From a systemic point of view, all perspectives / reductions must always be reflected in relation to their relativity and in relation to the restrictions that result from the fact that other perspectives through reductions are not part of the perspective (in this essay the observer is described as part of the relationship system and as the actual "constructor" of the "error concept"); indirectly it is mentioned here that the adaptation process of the system and the environment (or adaptation processes within a system) takes place in a continuous feedback process.

**Key words:** systems therapy, constructivism, behavioral disorder, communication, feedback, triangulation, triad, perverse triangle.

**Conflict of interest.** The authors declare the absence of obvious and potential conflicts of interest associated with the publication of this article.

**Citation:** Gessmann H.-W. System –therapeutic view of the experience and behavior in children and adolescents. *Siberian Medical Review*. 2020;(4):108-110. DOI: 10.20333/2500136-2020-4-108-110

To start with: I believe that there are no disturbances in the experience or behavior in children and adolescents. What we call behavioral or experiencing disorder are always adaptations of children and adolescents to the relationship system in which they are integrated. What we call disorder is something that bothers us, irritates, hinders our own satisfaction in need. We are part of the relationship system, to which the child or adolescent belongs.

I present my topic as part of an epistemology that also reflects the recognition of the knower. This epistemology is known as constructivism [8]. From a constructivist point of view, systems - and these are families too - are not "recognized", but "invented" by the observer [1].

The therapist of a family first determines which people belong to the family and which relationships are lived between these people. In general terms: The observer of a system first determines what he wants to consider as a system and which relationships between system members he perceives and interprets in what way. He is just as involved in the invention of the system as the other system members who are grouped around a symptom, for example.

In the conventional psychological view, symptoms are seen as necessary to keep the system in balance - in a so-called homeostasis. Without this symptom, a family would break up and family members would leave the family. The more recent systemic view sees the (invention) of a symptom as an interpretative creative act by people who convince other people of their perception and include them in an attempt to solve them [7].

From a constructivist point of view, the first question asked was who noticed the "symptom" and who it affected. It may turn out that a teacher is involved in the problem definition in a special way, who has "adopted" the pupil

and confuses the mother with his worries. The boy's father and siblings have so far seen the drop-in performance as an unexciting adolescent side effect that has become self-evident over time.

The teacher engages a school psychologist who describes the father's attitude as disinterested and who sees in it the expression of a covert marital conflict (which is carried out on behalf of the boy). The father, however, tells the story in the pub to a constructivist-minded acquaintance who interprets the process in such a way that the mother wants to shine in front of the teacher as a good, successful mother. The teacher, on the other hand, is afraid of the success of his favorite student, which has to do with his otherwise infrequent "fatherly" needs. The teacher and mother "invented" a problem and sought allies for this.

Human meaning and meaning always remain dependent or related to the point of view of the observer, which implies a fundamental relativity of all perceptual and cognitive processes. A family member's behavioral problems, problems or psychological symptoms are not understood as individual pathology, but as a necessary regulatory component of the entire system. Symptoms are thus understood in the same way as "controllers" in automatic machines, which ensure the necessary balance for the overall system [6].

The formation of a symptom was seen in a similar way. A school problem, for example, can be seen as a child's "feedback", which feels threatened by the tensions of the parents. It produces its symptom to interrupt parents' attention to their conflict and draw them to themselves. This leads to an interim relaxation of the couple, with which the child calms down and strengthens his school performance again. The result is that the parents turn back to their strained relationship,

which again calls the child with his symptom on the scene. The “symptom” of the child solidifies into a regulative, which the family receives.

As you can see, a salient feature of systems is their recursive, circular connection of system components. I want to show the recursive, circular link again: the child reacts to the tensions between the parents with school difficulties, the parents react to the school difficulties by turning more towards the child. This improves his school performance, whereupon the parents concentrate more on themselves and get into their old relationship conflicts. As a result, the child's school performance deteriorates again [9]. Each person contributes to the stability of a system. So, every person is a co-creator of a context that he may complain about.

From a systemic-therapeutic point of view, the most important question is: What contribution does each member make so that a complained symptom, a problem does not change? And what changes to your own behavior would it be ready to invest in order to find a solution to the problem.

An example: There is a child who is afraid of going to school. And there is a father who complains about it forever and yells at the child. So, it would not only be the nagging and screaming father to ask how he can change his behavior, but also the wife, who denies him recognition and security. Ultimately, the older child preferred by both parents, the “sunshine” has to be considered. From the point of view of systems theory, it is not so important to understand how a system (historically) developed, but how it is maintained at the present time.

I want to explain this in a chess game, which you are probably all familiar with: To successfully complete a chess game, you have to consider the possibilities for a particular move that the next move should have to be successful. The analysis of the game happening up to the current time is not significant, because this game state can have developed from different ways. Just knowing the currently valid system rules (and therapeutically: their changeability) and the current state are important for the future.

Systems are process-based, i.e. they absorb “information” and restructure themselves through the permanent interaction of their system members with surrounding systems, they change over time (more children are born, older children leave the house etc.). The impulses for development come from the mutual adaptation and penetration of the person as a psychic system and the environment as a social system. In the process of development, a person gradually takes up the expectations and standards of behavior of the social system until they become internalized and self-effective motivational forces and goals for their own actions.

Human development, socialization as a process, therefore, has no fixed goal or end point. However, the mutual relationship between person and environment strives for a state of equilibrium.

To do this, system rules have to lose their meaning and others have to be created. This is done through communication. Social systems are determined by the way the system members communicate. Systems are also very much determined by “rules, rules of the game”. “Rules of the game”, which are to be understood analogously to the rules of chess [10] [11].

A third aspect relates to the fact that systems always have structures. When analyzing family structures, particular attention was drawn to the importance of the three-way relationship, the triad. There are congruent and incongruent triads [12] [13]. What is a congruent triad? Every person in this love triangle has the opportunity to comment, react and express their feelings. The relationships are characterized by respect. Everyone has the freedom to communicate how they experience the situation. There is no compulsion to conform in this triad. Everyone can think, feel and act as they want. In the case of the incongruent triads, the cross-generational triads have a special meaning. If a child is involved in the regulation of the marital relationship, this is called triangulation. For example, when both partners fight for the child's sympathy in order to balance their own tensions [2] [5] [14].

If one parent succeeds in a permanent alliance with a child against another parent, then one speaks of a coalition. A coalition is always directed against a third person. If this cross-generational coalition is denied and denied by those involved, it is called a “perverse triangle”. In the perspective of structuralist directions, these cross-generational denied coalitions are understood as an important pathogenic factor.

## References

1. Watzlawik P. Die erfundene Wirklichkeit. München. Pieper. 326 s.
2. Gross A. Die Bowen'sche Familiensystemtheorie. Eine Einführung in Theorie und Praxis. *Kontext*.2012; 43 (1):4–21. DOI:10.13109/kont.2012.43.1.4
3. F. von Ameln. Konstruktivismus: Die Grundlagen systemischer Therapie, Beratung und Bildungsarbeit. Tübingen: Francke Verlag; 2004. 272s.
4. Haley J. Uncommon therapy: the psychiatric techniques of Milton Erickson. New York: Norton; 1993. 320p.
5. Watzlawick P, Weakland J. Interaktion. Bern: Huber; 1980. 52 s.
6. Jackson DD. The question of family homeostasis. *The Psychiatric Quarterly Supplement*.1957;31 (1):79–90.
7. Kriz J. Grundkonzepte der Psychotherapie. Weinheim: Beltz; 2014. 336 s.

8. Kriz J, Schlippe A. Konstruktivismus in Psychologie, Psychotherapie und Coaching. *Familiendynamik*. 2011;36 (2):142–153.
9. Maturana H, Varela F. Der Baum der Erkenntnis. München: Scherz; 1987. 280 s.
10. Rieforth J. Triadisches Verstehen in sozialen Systemen. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme. 2006. 258 s.
11. Selvini Palazzoli M, Boscolo L, Cecchin G, Prata G. Paradoxon und Gegenparadoxon. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta; 1977. 166 s.
12. Maturana H R, Pörksen B. Vom Sein zum Tun. Die Ursprünge der Biologie des Erkennens. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer-Systeme. 2018. 223 s.

13. Pörksen B (Hrsg). Schlüsselwerke des Konstruktivismus. Wiesbaden: Springer; 2015. 600 s.

14. Haley J. Ordeal-Therapie: ungewöhnliche Wege der Verhaltensänderung. Salzhausen: iskopress. 1994;208 s.

#### **Author information**

*Hans-Werner Gessmann, PhD Clinical Psychology, Director of International Centre of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Germany; Address: Franz-Beck-Straße 31, Aichach, Germany 86551; Phone: (+49) 177 5722600 e-mail: h.w.gessmann@gmail.com; webpage: <https://www.icpp.org/gessmann-bibliographie/>*

*Received 08 June 2020*

*Revision Received 15 June 2020*

*Accepted 08 July 2020*