

Bring in the family

Kara Smith argues that a sensitive combination of individual and systemic approaches can achieve a more lasting outcome for young clients

At the 2006 BACP annual conference, Ernesto Spinelli spoke about how individual clients' needs cannot be seen as operating in a vacuum and that it is important for therapists to consider the impact that therapy has on a client's existing relationships. Subsequent to this, BACP published a number of articles exploring how systemic therapeutic approaches could contribute to work with individuals. In one of these¹, Peter Stratton said: 'Where therapy fails to take account of anything but the client's world, the process will be little more than fishing a drowning man out of a river, teaching him to ride a bicycle and then throwing him back in again.'

This is not, I believe, to dismiss the value of exploring the internal world of the client in therapy, but inviting us as counsellors and therapists to take a 'both/and' position in our work, not 'either/or'. The idea, I think, behind this is that changes in the client need to be supported by the client's existing relationships as well as the therapeutic relationship, and that systemic ideas and techniques can help counsellors mobilise these resources.

Recognising the value of a systemic approach

My conviction about the value of systemic approaches to individual counselling² – especially with children and young people – first developed from my own experience as a Relateen counsellor working with children aged 11-18 who were affected by the divorce and separation of their parents. I saw most of my clients on an individual basis. But sometimes I found that once the children had the opportunity to explore their feelings about their parents' break-up, they would often like their parents to know how they felt, but were not sure how to make this possible. Ideas that came up as to how they might do this ranged from wanting me to speak to parents directly (I felt reluctant to do this) to wanting to arrange sessions that might include their parents. My understanding of this was that the client needed support with helping their parents accept changes the client had made in our work together.

With some trepidation, I responded to my clients' requests to invite parents to sessions, conscious that my main concern was to take care that I did not break my contract of confidentiality with my client by sharing anything with the

parents that my client had not agreed to. I did this by rehearsing before the parental session what the client was happy for me to address, and by concentrating on facilitating the conversation between parent and child.

The outcome of these sessions was that they seemed greatly to help the communication between the clients and their parents by offering everyone the opportunity of safely addressing the 'unsaid' and also of identifying previously unrecognised resources in their family. A further beneficial outcome was that often one or two sessions involving parents were enough for the young person to be happy to end the counselling relationship.

As counsellors, we are aware that clients can become dependent on us (and we on them). Part of this is an important development in establishing the therapeutic relationship, but I have always had concerns about this when it comes to working with young people, who have no choice but to accept their dependency on adults in their own families.

So what does it mean to the client when s/he undergoes changes in counselling to which the family cannot easily adapt? My experience is that this leads to the client seeing counselling as the only context where s/he can be accepted, while struggling to know how they can become accepted in other significant relationships in their life outside the therapeutic relationship. My way of tackling this was by first encouraging the young person to think about how their families might be affected by what they had begun to understand in counselling and why it might be difficult for them to accept the changes they had made. For instance, changing from being the quiet/compliant child in the family to being a more verbally assertive person could result in confusion and resentment in the family about the changes the young person had made through counselling.

Inviting parents to sessions (with the client's agreement) therefore can become an important way of helping the family manage such changes. Although this approach seemed to work, I was aware that I needed to know more about the how and why, and also how I might manage such sessions without damaging the therapeutic relationship or alienating members of my client's family.

Taking a systemic approach encourages the therapist to become aware of alternative perspectives on the problem and not to become too attached to any one interpretation

This experience motivated my decision to undertake training in systemic/ family therapy. And although this mostly involved learning the theory and practice of working systemically with families, I continued to work as a counsellor of clients aged 16-plus within a Further Education college and began to introduce systemic ways of working into my individual work. This was a difficult period of transition as I struggled to integrate individual with systemic approaches. It is only since qualifying in system therapy that I have had the confidence to fully use the theory and skills from my systemic training within my work as a counsellor.

Systemic theory

Systemic approaches can be seen as coming under a broad umbrella of different and overlapping approaches: structural/strategic, Milan, narrative, social constructionist, and solution focused. The models that have most influenced me and which I use most in my work are Milan, narrative and social constructionist³.

One of the most important aspects in this way of working is that problems presented by clients are seen as symptoms of the difficulties within the family system or other wider systems rather than the sole property of the person identified as having the problem. For example, a young person's rebellious behaviour at school could be seen as a symptom of difficulties/conflict in the family context. Such symptoms could also be seen as performing the function of attempting to distract the parents from arguing with one another. Another prominent aspect in systemic thinking is that a change in one part of the system often results in change occurring in another part of the system. So a consequence of an improvement in the young person's behaviour, in this example, could be that the parents begin to confront their own conflictual relationship.

Students who come to me for counselling are often struggling with difficult relationships with their parents or other members of their family, which sometimes results in a deterioration in their physical health, such as migraine attacks, IBS (irritable bowel syndrome) or acute neck pain. It is often not possible to treat these symptoms in a purely physical way, as they are often emotionally generated and can be understood in the context of the client's family dynamics. I have found that using a systemic approach has helped clients think about the impact other family members have on them and how they, in turn, might influence what happens in the family. Problems, therefore, can be explained in a circular way and not in a linear causal way⁴, thus avoiding blame being placed on any one member of the system. So the emphasis in systemic work is on what happens at an interpersonal level rather than on an intrapsychic one.

Working systemically with individual clients

Working systemically with individuals means bringing the family into the room in a *metaphorical* sense, which helps the individual client to think about the perceptions and beliefs of other family members. By recognising the resources and strengths in other family members, the client can be helped to create a new story that is not problem focused.


So how do I work with individuals in a systemic way? There is a range of techniques and approaches that can help us work systemically:

- hypothesising – formulating an explanation for what might be happening
- circular questions – generating new information by eliciting the perspectives of different members of the family
- reframing – finding alternative explanations and perspectives
- being curious about the client – avoiding having a rigid opinion but being flexible and open to changing one's interpretation or hypothesis
- meta-communication – talking about talking
- genograms – exploring family patterns by looking at family trees
- self-reflexivity – thinking about how we affect others and they in turn affect us.

A common technique is *circular questioning*, which encourages the client to think in a relational way about significant others in their life. The questions could be seen as more of a spiral than a circle – this would mistakenly imply moving back to the same point. An example of such a question would be: 'What would your mother say if she heard what we have been talking about?' or 'What would you be doing with your brother if you did get on?' This technique could be identified as being similar to 'chair work' in the Gestalt approach⁵.

Being asked such questions results in clients feeling that they have been helped to think about things in a way they have not done before and therefore generates the possibility of constructing a new story (narrative) for themselves. This encourages a process of *self-reflexivity* which actually means 'turns back on itself' – which constitutes more than a process of self-reflection, as it involves not only being aware of what one is feeling or thinking but extending this further to thinking about how what one feels or thinks will impact on others and then how that in turn might influence the way others might react to you.

Self-reflexivity is an important process for both client and therapist and it helps keep a check on the impact the counsellor and the client are having on each other. It therefore means consciously taking an ongoing observer position on one's own interaction with the client. It can also help us identify 'triggers' where the client's family patterns can remind the counsellor/therapist of his/her own family experiences.



By recognising the resources and strengths in other family members, the client can be helped to create a new story that is not problem focused

I have also found that taking a systemic approach encourages the counsellor or therapist to become aware of alternative perspectives on the problem presented and not to become too attached to any one interpretation. This can be done by being curious about what the client is telling us. So where the client says that she sees herself as 'hopeless' but that her tutor has remarked on her resourcefulness, I could explore what she thinks her tutor would say about her view that she is hopeless – thereby encouraging the client to explore a different view of herself.

Another method that helps explore intergenerational patterns in the family is constructing a family genogram with them. This offers an opportunity for clients to talk about significant family stories and recognise the influence they have had, and also identify resources in the family which they have previously not recognised.

Working with family members (literally) in the room

Some years after bringing family members into the counselling session as a Relateen counsellor, I ventured into setting this up again with renewed confidence within my counselling context with students. This time, I was more able to prepare against the possible pitfalls of this approach. Two of the main ethical concerns I identified were: breaking my contract of confidentiality with my client; and the possibility of damaging the therapeutic relationship.

The way I was able to guard against these potentially real problems was by first of all ensuring that the client was happy about the family member coming to the session. I would first check what the client hoped for from this. Then I would also establish how the family would be invited. I would encourage the client to talk to the family before the session but if that were not possible, I would offer to write a letter but would draft it in conjunction with the client, so that s/he would know exactly what would be said. I would also discuss with the client my approach prior to the session itself and assure her/him that I would not raise any issues that we had discussed in previous sessions without consent.

The main objective would be to negotiate a goal for the session itself by asking both my client and family member what they hoped for from the session. I also explain to my client that I will not side with anyone during the session and try to elicit the other family members' views as to what might be helpful for the client. Although my focus during the session could not be only on the client, client feedback following the session has indicated that there had been no detriment to the therapeutic relationship.

The client is often sceptical that the family member will even attend a session and will be certain not to help them. This means that when family members do turn up, it has the immediate and positive effect (before any interventions take place) of showing the client that the family is interested in them. When the

other family members see that I am curious about their perspectives, and invite them to give their ideas about how to help the client, their initial anxiety usually falls away, and they become engaged and enthusiastic to help. This, often in a single session, breaks their mutual conviction that they cannot communicate effectively. When individual sessions resume, clients (who had previously spent a great deal of time expressing their negative feelings about their family) talk much less about their family problems and turn their attention to their own individual issues. My understanding of this radical change is that clients are now able to deal directly with their family problems outside the counselling context.

Conclusions

Individual therapy can involve both intrapsychic and systemic approaches. Thinking about the family context is particularly relevant when working with children and young people, who inevitably remain dependent on their family of origin. It is possible to work with families both metaphorically (with individual clients) and literally when it is possible to introduce family members into the counselling room without necessarily undermining the therapeutic relationship. I have tried in this article to give an outline of how systemic thinking can be helpful in individual counselling practice. ■

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Further reading

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