

# A Paradigm Shift From Lines To Circles: Twelve Characteristics of a Family System

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## **1. Organized around interactions and within a hierarchy of interrelated subsystems.**

In the family, the *executive subsystem* is that of the parents; the *sibling subsystem* is that of the children. Invisible *boundaries*--unspoken rules about who does what with whom--are drawn around each (and around the immediate family itself) so that each subsystem can carry out its family-stabilizing tasks while remaining connected to the others. One of the most common family problems is a weak boundary between subsystems. A woman making several calls a day from work to instruct her teenagers on how to dress for school, what to say when they turn in homework, and so forth indicates overinvolvement with the sibling subsystem; a man who calls or visits his mother every time he argues with his wife shows a weak boundary between the immediate and extended families.

## **2. Wholeness: the system is greater than sum of the parts.**

In therapy it's quite common to see, say, a little boy suddenly make everyone laugh at precisely the moment the therapist is asking the uncomfortable parents how their marriage is going. Without knowing it, the boy, usually prompted by some subtle signal from his parents, protects the family by taking the heat off them and their fragile relationship. The therapist, seeing the family operating as a whole (self-preservation through distraction) rather than as isolated individuals (Mom, Dad, the son), might then comment on the behavior and praise the family for being so resonant and close-knit.

## **3. Each part of the system affects all others.**

I've never seen a family with an alcoholic member, but I have seen alcoholic families in which the member who drinks controls the whole family with his behavior. His unavailability, bad health, violence, unpredictability, and self-contempt distort every interaction between family members. The whole family learns to (mal)adapt itself to his drinking--via maneuvers like denial, bailing him out of jail if he drinks and drives, calling in sick for him if he's hung over, walking carefully when he's drunk and angry, unconsciously nominating one child to stand in for him and parent the family...Family therapists use the term IP--Identified Patient--because a dysfunctional family member generally means a destabilizing family system.

## **4. Interrelations emphasized more than components; systemwide ripples ("these**

**cause each other'') emphasized more than linearity (this causes that).**

Whatever its components, unresolved stress between parents reverberates down through all family interrelations and normally results in *coalitions*, emotional parent-child alignments against the other parent and perhaps other children. Example: Mom is a rageaholic, so when she explodes, Dad and Brother console one another and perhaps agree that she's nuts. A linear approach would emphasize Mom's upbringing and lack of anger management skills and thereby ignore the coalition process itself and reinforce its tendency to scapegoat, whereas a systems approach would focus on the present-time context of Mom's explosions, looking at the interactions leading up to it and encouraging Dad and Mom to work out new, nonescalating ways to talk and negotiate--perhaps in couples therapy--rather than blaming her or him or failing to confront and defuse alliances forming elsewhere in the family.

**5. Circular (mutual, reciprocal) causality: emphasizes present, process. Linear causality: emphasizes past, content.**

When a couple in session argues about how it started, I let them know I'm more interested in where it's going: "How will you resolve this here?" With many alcoholics, inherited biology and family stress and low self-esteem and other dynamics all play a part; what counts for the alcoholic isn't looking for causes so much as cutting the feedback circles that maintain drinking. A good clinician will refer the client to AA, consider hospitalization, assess for suicidal intent, advise a physical, ask about weapons in the home, and work on both family and individual levels with interventions aimed at interactions (arguments, nagging, money problems, abuse) that presently maintain the alcoholism.

**6. Calibration: setting of a present-oriented, systemwide range limit around a comfortable emotional "bias."**

A typical situation: an unintense family with a cool emotional atmosphere unconsciously selects a member to turn up the heat; brother and sister start fighting. This turns into an argument between the parents, the drama escalates, and then, before it gets too hot, a child who plays the role of family ambassador calms everybody down. In that family the bias, the emotional level setting, is too low; a good dose of constructive intensity might recalibrate the bias and make explosions unnecessary.

**7. Self-regulating via feedback loops--negative (toward stability) and positive (toward change)--that maintain the bias.**

Every seasoned drug and alcohol counselor knows that when one member of the family stops drinking or using, the family will subtly try to push him back into his old vices--not because they want him sick, but because families, like other organisms, naturally resist changes that might further destabilize the system. So one day the husband says to his abstaining wife, "Why not skip your AA meeting tonight so we can catch a movie?" Or the mother of a teen who's quit using congratulates him on finding a job--in a head shop.

Introducing positive (= system-changing) feedback loops into these families might include warning them about enabling, relapses and resistance to change and examining what family members gain from having a malfunctioning member (control? A scapegoat? Distraction from other conflicts? Someone to rescue?).

**8. Synergy: interactions and feedback loops add to each other as they combine (a dynamic expression of wholeness).**

Battery normally begins with emotional or verbal abuse (name-calling, shouting, intimidation, shaming) and escalates over the years from pushing and shoving to beatings and even murder. Abuse gives rise to more abuse, violence to more violence: destructive synergy. In constructive synergy, however, a batterer uses a batterer's group to learn and master rage-control techniques; those enhance his self-esteem; his wife praises his efforts and trusts him more; he feels good about that and shows her more empathy; the two get problems out on the table instead of hiding them; both grow; their affection deepens; their children carry the resulting relationship blueprint into their own relationships. Therapists prime this process by helping clients consciously relate and capitalize on growth-producing thoughts, feelings, and interactions ("Now that you stopped drinking, he feels safer telling you about his sadness; you empathized, so he is listening to you more often and with greater care...good work! How will you keep this rolling?")

**9. Equipotentiality ("equal in the beginning"): things with the same original conditions can go different ways; members of the same family system can share a very similar upbringing but turn out to be very unlike each other.**

Even twins eventually take different roads, grow into individuals with their own insights and values, habits and preferences. Consciousness guarantees that what we choose to make of our original conditions is more important than the conditions themselves. The abuse survivor who owns the pain moves on; the one who won't becomes a chronic victim and will probably get into revictimizing situations. Therapists who realize this assume that a client can and should take full responsibility for the work of healing no matter how dangerous or abusive that client's environment may have been.

**10. Equifinality (equal in the end): things with different original conditions can turn out the same.**

I'm an adoptee who grew up with one sister and Lutheran parents, still together, of North European descent; the man who mentors my work with batterers wasn't adopted and grew up with a brother and Catholic parents, both Italian, who divorced; and yet our values, professional goals, criticisms of traditional therapy, and counseling philosophy are very similar and in all important points the same. When I work with clients, I never assume that a violent survivor who grew up in South Central L.A. will be less serious about growth and change or less capable of working toward it than a more "adjusted" client raised in a good home by loving parents. In the end, we are what we make of what we were given.

**11. Living systems and all they bring with them--equipotentiality, equifinality, wholeness, feedback loops, and all the other system-enhancing processes--move forward through key "horizontal" (brought about by time and change) transitional stages. Symptoms occur when vertical stressors (old issues, past mistakes, emotional legacies) impinge on the system during a transition.**

Families are likeliest to be conflicted and symptomatic when key horizontal transitions like marriage, the birth of children, children going to school, children moving away from home, changes of jobs, etc. coincide with a resurfacing of vertical stressors like old emotional baggage. Example: a workaholic husband driven to succeed by high internalized standards (Rogers's "conditions of worth") that equate esteem with production (vertical stressor) puts in even more overtime to stuff the loneliness he feels when his eldest son leaves for college (horizontal stressor). Worried about his health, escalating stress, and increasing distance from her, his wife suggests that they see a family therapist. Part of the therapeutic agenda would include giving the family tools for negotiating the "empty nest syndrome" while helping the husband get in touch with his mourning, examine his expectations of himself, and reconnect with his family.

**12. First-order changes are those that help the system stay at its current level of functioning. Second-order changes restructure the system to bring it to a different level.**

Teaching family members how to use "I" statements and listen empathically demonstrate first-order changes that enhance the family's current functioning. Coaching a widow through the loss of her husband, helping a couple let go of the last child to leave the nest, and restructuring an alcoholic family to eliminate drinking are second-order changes that alter the family fundamentally, bringing it to an entirely new structure and psychological place.

**13. Overall, human systems tend to work best when subsystem boundaries are clear (neither too open nor too closed), interactions are clear and nonrepetitive, lines of authority are visible, rules are overt and flexible, changing alignments replace rigid coalitions, and stressors are confronted instead of pushed onto scapegoats.**

Yes, there really are families--and extended families and neighborhoods and even companies--that work this way: members are clear about what to expect from one another and neither intrude nor distance themselves, they speak openly and affectionately to one another, they know who's in charge of what, they know and can talk about what is permitted and what isn't, their roles and favorites are flexible and changing, and they feel comfortable and safe getting problems and hurt feelings out in the open where everyone can work on them. When enough families succeed at this, perhaps the systemic impact on whole nations will become irresistible. As Confucius noted long ago:

*If there be righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.  
If there be beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.*

*If there be harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation.  
If there be order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.*