

Glossary of terms

analogic: a non-verbal means of communicating, using physical movements and expressive bodily actions, including speech tone and volume variations. There is often a close equivalence between the content of what is being communicated and the choice of these means. For example, irritation might be expressed by a clipped intonation, the lips compressed without a smile.

circularity: when what happens is in some way determined by some precursor event and has also had some effect on that first event, where it is not possible to determine 'which came first, the chicken or the egg'. This way of viewing the world grew out of biology and ecology. It is consistent with a *linear conception* if the latter is seen as treating just one small segment of a larger interrelated whole.

circular questioning: questions asked with the intention of revealing differences between people who are members of some system. The questioner expects that the answer will help them to refine their *working hypothesis* (see below) and so become interested in asking a further question based on feedback from their respondent. It is this process between the questioner and the respondent, driven by feedback, that changes the respondent's perspective on their situation and stimulates new thinking.

co-construction: a form of interaction between two individuals or groups where neither prejudices the form that the output of their interaction will take, but each puts forward their respective contributions, confident that the result will be more effective than a similar effort being made by either of them alone (see also *hermeneutic*).

complementarity: a form of relationship where two people or groups, although differing in characteristics or attributes, find that they can fit together in achieving a shared goal, either by accepting reciprocity (as in a hierarchical, one-up-one-down fit) or by the periodic and accepted reversal or alteration of their relative position.

cybernetics: derived from the Greek word meaning 'to steer'. Cybernetics is the science of systems that are capable of self-direction and guidance through the ability to alter their activity on the basis of information returning feedback about the results of previous action. Cybernetics has led to the development of so-called 'intelligent' systems.

discourse: conveys the important idea (after Wittgenstein) that our concepts, the basis of our thinking, are expressed by words, which are located in language.

We use these to engage *in action* with others to accomplish practical, ceremonial and communicative activities. We can talk therefore of the *speech-act* as central to our interactions with others. This constitutes a form of life or reality in which a person can be seen as a meeting point of many discourses, for example, a *discursive* subject.

double-bind: a form of contradictory communication seen to be causal in the development of schizophrenia and other disturbances (Bateson et al. 1956). The central aspects are contradictory communication in different modalities (for example, saying 'I love you' with a tense and angry bodily posture) and an overarching injunction that the incongruity is not to be discussed and that the participants must not attempt to leave the relationship.

ecology of ideas: the collection of individuals' beliefs – usually implicit or unconscious – that, by their interconnectedness and mutual relevance, underpin a social system.

epistemology: the study of how we think and arrive at decisions, how we explain how we know what we know. A system of ideas or connected beliefs about how we view and explain the world; cf. George Kelly's (1955) notion of a 'construct system'.

equifinality: a law of system relationships which holds that the same eventual goal can be reached from differing starting points and by differing intervening processes/steps.

expressed emotion: a set of factors relating to the emotional tone in family life – critical remarks, emotional over-involvement, general warmth or coldness. High expressed emotion – extreme criticisms, coldness and over-involvement – in families is seen to increase the chances of relapse of members recovering from mental illness.

feedback: information about the results or consequences of a previous action returning or looping back into a system in order to regulate subsequent action. The connection can be positive feedback, which increases the initial behaviour emitted leading to escalation, or negative feedback, leading to a reduction of the divergence from some stable setting or equilibrium.

first-order cybernetics: this is the view that biological and social systems can be seen as self-regulating systems analogous to mechanical systems. It is argued that families can be objectively described in terms of how they function and maintain balance states or homeostasis.

hermeneutic: interpretative (as of texts), but used also to refer to the process by which meaning and understanding are recognized as evolving in dialogue between people.

instructive interaction: an episode between people where the intent and belief of one person is that the knowledge or beliefs that they hold can be transmitted to the other so that they will end up being able to use such knowledge or beliefs in precisely the way intended by the 'instructor'. This form of 'teaching' contrasts with experiential learning types of interaction, where the objective of one person is to facilitate the development of the other's capacity for gaining new insights.

linear thinking: the established view of causation derived from classical science that one event, A, directly causes another event, B, to occur. In relation to family life, it would be a view that one member can directly cause another to do, say, think or feel something. Similarly, ideas about internal dispositions such as personality can be employed to offer linear explanations (for example, that Jane complains at Robin because she has a 'controlling' personality).

meta-: (as in 'taking up a meta-position') taking a view of an issue from a different, usually higher, level, for example, metaphysics.

mind-maps: the internalized sense of the connectedness of experiences that an individual has built up through interactions with others that gives security in making decisions about action or in making sense of new experiences.

modernism: the belief that it is possible, by objective and 'scientific' research, to arrive at general, universally applicable explanations of 'how things work', at theories and quantifiable 'models' of phenomena that can be used to predict and control events, from the way plants grow to the way people behave (see also *universal solutions*).

modernity: the *paradigmatic* position in which reality is held to exist independent of the observer, and where objectivity in the study and description of another person, group or phenomenon is held to be possible.

multiple realities: the perspective that results when reality is viewed as being created by social interaction, so that, in principle, 'there are as many universes as there are willing describers' (Watzlawick 1984).

negative connotation: the opposite of *positive connotation* (see below) where the explanation for a situation emphasizes a harmful or destructive effect or intent.

neutrality: a stance maintained by a therapist or professional, showing equal and non-judgemental interest in the beliefs and explanations of each family member. This reflects in constructionist thinking the awareness of *multiple realities* (see above). The stance alone can lead to a significant shift in behaviour among system members who have only been used to privileging one construction of a situation in their attempts to solve a problem.

paradigm: a widely shared way of viewing and explaining 'how things work around here' for a given community that is largely unspoken and resistant to challenge (see also *mind-maps*).

positive connotation/frame: form of *reframing* (see below) in which behaviour or situations that are experienced negatively by clients are explained in ways that suggest a positive intention for the system as a whole in the behaviours of the other people or groups associated with the problem (see also *negative connotation*).

positivism: (as in 'logical positivism') a point of view that puts forward scientific observations as the only basis for assessing 'truth', and that considers arguments not based on observable data as meaningless (see also *modernism*).

praxis: most simply translated as personal theory-in-action or the practical living out of one's central ideas, conditioned by a *hermeneutic* (see above) approach to understanding and developing this form of knowledge.

progressive hypothesizing: devised by the Milan team, this approach is a microcosm of the scientific method – testing and revision of hypotheses based on experimentation and gathering of new data. It involves the formulation of an initial working hypothesis about the relationship between the symptom(s) and the family dynamics. This is seen as propositional and subjected to continual review and revision.

psychodynamic: the practice of psychotherapy, based on the theories of Freud, where the benefit for the client is held to derive from the giving of 'insights' by the therapist, and the use of this insight by the client to come to different understandings of relationships, including those cases where what happens between the therapist and the client is interpreted by the therapist as repeating a pattern between the client and some significant person in their past.

punctuation: the act of choosing the point of view from which one will explain a complex set of interrelated events, as in describing to a listener the reasons for a bad relationship by starting with the actions of one of the parties.

reductionism: the belief in a method for understanding how complex systems work by breaking their operation down into small subprocesses, each of which is affected by relatively few major variables, making the measurement and prediction of outcomes more manageable.

reflexivity: where some action, statement or question 'turns back on itself' and leads to some change in the state of the initiating system component. Used, for example, in the context of 'reflexive questioning' where a professional, by asking a particular question that refers to concepts or meanings held by the client system, intends to influence the clients to reorganize their

understanding of those concepts in such a way that the issue is seen in a different light.

reframing: putting forward an alternative explanation about a situation clients perceive as problematic, so the situation ceases to be viewed as problematic.

Rogarian: a form of psychotherapy developed by Carl Rogers, where the chief benefit is held to derive from the therapist showing unconditional positive regard for the client, and which encourages the free expression of feelings associated with the problem incidents and relationships.

second-order cybernetics: the view that a 'system' invariably involves an act of observation. Hence there can be no objective system as such, but the system is an 'as if' construction. In family therapy, the analysis moves to looking not just at the family dynamics but also the nature of the interactions between the family and the therapist.

strategic therapy: where the therapist negotiates goals with the family and then devises tasks for the family members to perform, in the process making it difficult for them to continue with what have been diagnosed as 'non-normal' behaviours. It may also help the family to achieve a transition in its evolution that had previously been blocked.

structural therapy: where the problems experienced by a family or other system are held to be related to some deficiency in structuring their relationships (such as unclear or absent inter-generational or role boundaries). The therapist/consultant acts as a member of the system in an interaction to block or disrupt what are seen as unhelpful interactions, so that by experiencing themselves in a more 'normal' relationship with others, people behave differently, and the problem they previously experienced disappears.

structure-determined change: derived from biology, this view proposes that the form that change takes in a system is determined by the laid-down structures of that system. In the case of human social systems, the change is linked to the prevailing beliefs and sense of context that each person has arrived at as a result of their earlier social interactions, and which are used by the individual or group as a basis for deciding on action in response to perturbations of their system.

symmetrical: (as in 'symmetrical relationship') where people interact with each other in similar ways, usually unconsciously, that lead them to mirror each other's actions, leading to escalating interchanges in which each attempts to reassert advantage over the other or even to compete for who is most 'ill' or in need.

systemic hypothesis: the ideas that professionals draw together and which connect the behaviour of all the members of the system, recognizing their particular views of the context and providing an explanation for the presence of the symptom.

triangulation: a process in which two people who are in conflict attempt to recruit a third person on to their side against the other (for example, parents attempting to entice a child into taking their side or a couple attempting to draw a therapist into taking sides).

universal solutions: ideas put forward that are held to provide a generally applicable answer to a frequently occurring problem, or a means of approaching a particular task, which, if followed, will always lead to accomplishment. These ideas derive typically from a modernist and positivist epistemology.

working hypothesis: the ideas that a professional draws together from initial contacts with the problem system concerning what may lie behind the difficulties being presented. These ideas are meant to guide the consultant's initial explanation or research and to surface more information about distinctions held by members of the problem system. With this new information, the consultant revises the hypothesis or forms a new one, to continue the process until the professional(s) can articulate a *systemic hypothesis* (see above).