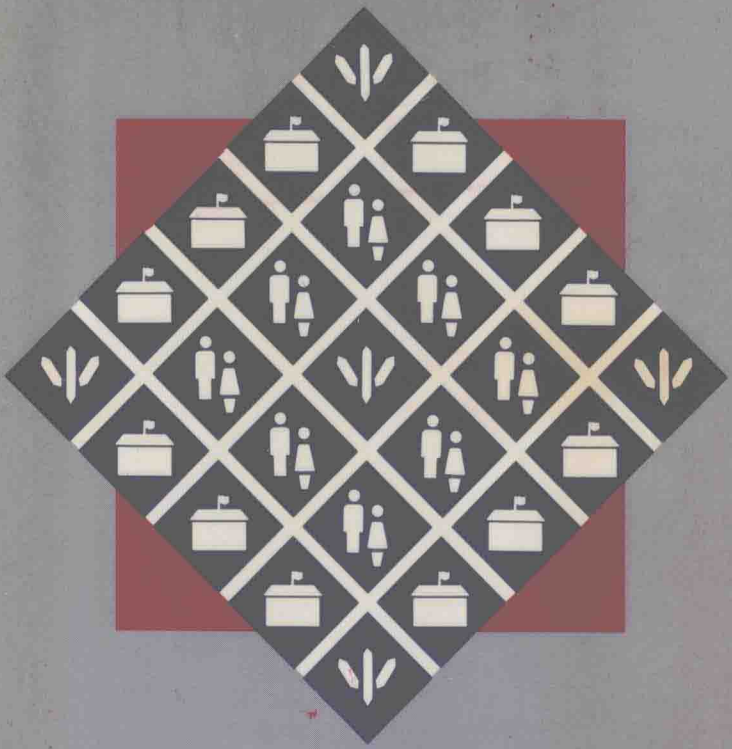
Systems Psychology in the Schools



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FOREWORD

Since at least the 1960s, practitioner psychologists working in community settings, such as schools, hospitals, and mental health centers, have been concerned with system change. It is no great secret that those with problems do not have these problems in isolation from other people and from their environments. We have long recognized the influence of parents on children and, more recently, have come to understand how schools, neighborhoods, friends, regional differences, and whole cultures affect the behaviors, feelings, attitudes, and values of those we attempt to help. We try to take this broader understanding of system influence into account when we conduct assessments or intervene in some way in the lives of others. Knowledge of a system in which an individual lives helps sensitize us to the problems presented for our consideration. But, for the most part, what we actually do with or for others is not always greatly changed by such knowledge. And those of us who are keenly aware that the system itself may need changing before we can do very much to help those within it are not often asked to change the system. Unfortunately, even if we are asked, we hardly know what to do to bring change about through the methods and techniques that are part of the psychological practitioner's repertoire.

Systems-oriented practitioners are faced with the dilemma of knowing that what they know is important but not knowing how to use that knowledge to actually resolve the person's problem. They know that people are parts of systems and interrelated with them in important ways. They are less certain about how to use such knowledge in ways that truly make for changes both in the person and in the setting in which that person must function.

If you are among those bothered by this dilemma, read on. Jeanne Plas has something to tell you that could change the way you think and work. Be prepared to be puzzled, upset, enlightened, and informed. Stay with the book until the end. Do not give up because the ideas presented are too foreign. If possible, arrange to have someone else read the book with you. Ideally, the book should be read as part of a graduate seminar or a professional in-service or continuing education course; but it can profitably be

read alone. If you read it alone, plan to talk to yourself about it. However you do it, read it from cover to cover. You will not be sorry. You may not agree with all you read; you may be especially uncomfortable with her description of school-based intervention. You will have questions about ethics, procedures, and are likely to feel that there is too much to absorb, much less use in any immediately practical way. But, if you let it, this book can be an important experience in your professional life, bringing perspective to your work and changing what you do from now on.

Jeanne Plas synthesizes a literature that is not usually part of the background and education of practitioner psychologists, making it applicable to a particular setting: the public school. She reviews and analyzes philosophy and theory from many fields leading to the conclusion that all things are connected and that reality is between the knower and that which is known. She asks us to set aside our established ways of viewing psychological practice, at least as we read her book, and to reconsider how we come to know; how human knowledge occurs. She connects us with Eastern philosophy and points out how much we are influenced by the Western philosophies and developments leading to logical positivism, raising questions about where that has led us and what it has kept us from knowing. She relates school psychology practice to recent developments in physics, family therapy, and community psychology through the interconnectedness of systemic thinking. If you think all this sounds esoteric, remote, and unrelated to daily practice in psychology, you are wrong. It is practical in the best sense of the meaning of the term. You can use it; if not immediately as a new way of practice, then over time as a new way of thinking and acting.

Do you believe that language has precise meaning? Can you talk professionally without using the verb forms to be and to know? Do you believe that deduction and induction are the sine qua non of reasoning and logical thought? Can you accept and then ignore a referral issue and still be deeply involved in the resolution of the referral problem? Would you agree that consensual validation is the only possible form of validation? If you want change to occur, does that change have to be the goal of your intervention? Do you believe in cause and effect? Which is more important in professional practice, things or ideas? Do you think that science and practice can be value free? Which of these persons have influenced your thinking: Lightfoot, Polonyi, Lewin, Dewey, Barker, Bateson, Selvini-Palozzoli, Capra, Maturana, Adelbert Ames, Bentley? Are these questions important? You bet they are! They are at the very center of our professional behavior. This book will introduce you to ideas and people who may not have been part of your education or, perhaps, known to you only in a peripheral way. If you have become interested in family systems therapy, some of these ideas and names may be familiar. I doubt, though, that they have ever been

brought together as Jeanne Plas has done in this book, and I am reasonably certain that no one else so far has attempted to make *systemic* thinking (as contrasted with systems approaches) applicable to school psychology practice.

Schools and families are, in my view, the major important factors in our lives. We have begun to understand how members of families interact and talk to one another and how these interactions and communications can be understood and those involved helped to change the ways they relate to one another. We have less understanding of the connectedness of language, rules, and behaviors of those who live and work in schools.

There is a resurgence of interest in how school psychology can best serve schools and schooling, wherever it may occur. More than a few scholars are breaking new ground and providing the field with creative ideas about its potentials, bringing to the field ideas from many specialties in psychology and from other disciplines. It is an exciting time for school psychology, perhaps a "make or break" time, during which it can prove itself useful or else give way to those who can.

Jeanne Plas tells us that a new world view of human conduct is emerging and that it is time to consider how this view applies to schools. She also explains that it will not be easy to accept this view; that "new ground does not get broken without much sweat and aggravation." She encourages us to try, to learn, and to enjoy. It is especially important to note that enjoyment is part of what she asks us to consider; that our work and our struggle to understand what really happens in classrooms and in school buildings can be done with good humor, the excitement of discovery, and the headiness of seeing our world through new eyes.

So, read, struggle, learn, and enjoy!

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Excellence Foundation Professor
of Education and Psychology
University of North Carolina

PREFACE

In 1976, at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, I began teaching a doctoral seminar that presented the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the psychology department's combined program in clinical, community, counseling, and school psychology. A few years earlier, this systems-oriented doctoral training program, labelled Transactional-Ecological Psychology, was one of the first in the country to gain American Psychological Association accreditation in the new combined category (cf., Plas & Dokecki, 1982). The goal of the program was to educate scientist-professional psychologists who would work in one (or more) of the major professional practice settings. Further, the program sought to offer its students a specific frame of reference within which to think about the scientific and professional issues they would encounter as students and, later, as employed psychologists. The perspective was transactional and ecological. A somewhat different description of this perspective could be gained depending upon which faculty member or senior student was asked. That is still pretty much the case within the program. The lack of a unified "party line" probably has been at least partially responsible for some of the intellectual vibrancy within the program at Peabody-Vanderbilt during the past 10 years. Such speculation aside, however, the point I need to make here is that daughter of Aristotle and Newton that I was (and still am?), I found myself faced with an over-enrolled seminar of about 24 bright, assertive doctoral students who wanted to learn about this new world view called *transactionalism*. So did I. About a week before the course was to start, it occurred to me that, for about a year, I had been missing the point in some important ways as I considered the John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949) version of transactional thinking, which was to be the core of the course. While modestly threatening, the situation was also fortuitous since it provided the opportunity to engage in genuine seminar-type exchange, as well as the development of out-of-class study groups, reminiscent of the early Kurt Lewin variety. And so it has gone for the past 10 years. I learn, unlearn, relearn, then start all over again with a new group of students and a new crop of books and articles. Happily, in some ways, the students have become more sophisticated with respect to systems thinking over the years (or, do

I get better at listening?). Also happily, the pertinent literature has increased geometrically both in quantity and quality over the past decade.

Always, the goal of the course has been to understand the ramifications of a nontraditional epistemology, which holds that the only phenomena to be known are those arising from the transaction between a knower and that which is to be known. Dewey and Bentley believed that human language represented that transaction. Language does not represent the thing named in any objective sense; rather, language represents a transaction between the limitations of the human's cultural background and hereditary "equipment" and whatever is "out there," available for knowing.

An important 1977–1978 study group concluded that causality, linearity and other such precious notions needed radical renovation if the integrity of the basic epistemological concept was to be preserved and pushed toward a useful model of scientific and/or professional practice. Something else thought in those days was that the major breakthrough we sought would probably occur within the scientific realm rather than the professional realm. It was obvious in the mid-1970s that the literature contained provocative theory and philosophy concerning these matters but little-or-no application either in applied or scientific psychology. We were right about the causality, linearity, etc. part and dead wrong about the scientific applications. A few people produced some interesting attempts at scientific transactional methodology (e.g., Gibbs , 1979), but there were no firecracker explosions of scientific insight.

Then, one afternoon in late 1979, one of our many perceptive graduate students, Andy Bernstein, stopped me in the hall and emphatically announced that "it" had been found—the answer to our philosophical prayers. He mentioned the words *counterparadox* and *Italy* a lot and said that he would bring around a book the next day. I really had little idea what he was trying to tell me, so I remained unconcerned when he did not show up with the book for a week or so.

Selvini-Palazzoli and her colleagues (1978) had produced a work that described a new approach to intervention with families in "schizophrenic transaction." Reading it was one of those rare and memorable experiences in which a book, picked up almost casually, is still in your hands hours later as you juggle other responsibilities in order to finish-the-thing-no-matter-what before you go to bed that night. The first couple of chapters focus on the theory supporting an innovative approach to family therapy with previously "incurable" families. The rest of the volume intersperses the theory among detailed descriptions of the techniques derived from it.

My intellectual life took a turn after that—as has the thinking of many who have consulted that work and the allied thinking of intellectual giants such as Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana. Time has been spent learning to understand the basics and forging meaningful syntheses of ideas

from systems thinkers of similar persuasion across a variety of sciences and applied professions. And always (always!) this process involved the use of my very Aristotelian, very Newtonian (very Western) mind. The square peg in the round hole analogy may be trite, but it is oh-so-apt in this particular case. Dragging a 20th century linear mind into systemic theory is not easy. That is part of the reason why it has been important to me to produce in this book as understandable a version of this systemic "reality" as I possibly could. I hope I have succeeded. Depending upon the level of systems sophistication and the degree of commitment to Western realities, some persons probably will find the treatment of the major ideas full of redundancy while others may find the issues in need of further explanation. Wherever one falls on this continuum, I hope that in reading this book some new ideas will be encountered and some enjoyable moments will be had.

The purpose of the book is twofold: To present a synthesis of ideas that bear on systems thinking and systems practice in psychology, and to develop a model for the application of a specific type, systemic psychology, in the public schools. Systems psychology is a subdiscipline that has been around for quite some time. Most of the work has been theoretical; some has been empirical; not nearly enough has been applied. A system is defined here as an organized set of relations that compose an organic whole. Those psychologists oriented toward systems are concerned with the relations within and among groups. They are interested in the structures and processes that create systems and make them "work." Rather than focusing on the individual, systems psychologists let the system stand as the unit of study or the unit of intervention. A variety of systems approaches are available in and out of psychology today. While there are sometimes vast differences among them, it is arguably accurate to say that all human systems psychologists reject the idea that an individual develops attitudes and behaviors in isolation; rather, the system is seen to influence (or control) such human activities. Within the myriad of available approaches to thinking about and working with organic systems, that called *systemic* is of special interest here. Systemic psychology represents a remarkably different way of thinking about the world. An appreciation of its major ideas often results in a radical shift in one's understanding of reality as well as one's orientation toward the practice of psychology.

Since its origination, the work of this particular brand of systems psychology has remained largely within family therapy circles, where it has created a revolution of sorts. At the very least, the systemic orientation required family therapists to redefine some of their basic beliefs. Many of those who work within this model report impressive changes in family dynamics over a relatively short period of time. Those are pretty dramatic claims—especially in the absence of extensive empirical evaluation. Nonetheless, the systemic version of psychological practice has not only held its ground, it

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has captured the imaginations of more and more practitioners each year, usually with the same outcome—satisfaction with the results.

It is time that systemic methods get a thorough evaluation within the public schools. Many believe that the schools are the best proving-ground for most innovative psychological approaches. Others worry that the public school setting provides nothing but a trial by fire. They believe that the nature of that system almost precludes success, especially with innovative techniques. Precisely because the schools compose one of America's most complex systems, it makes sense to me that important systems-oriented approaches must necessarily be evaluated there. Perhaps the schools have proven such a problem for psychologists precisely because traditionally they attempted to apply individually oriented methods in a setting that is importantly influenced by groups and systems. The schools tried to take strategies that work in a clinic or private therapy office and make them successful within a context that is not organizationally capable of responding to the needs of so many individual students as well as the needs of overworked and, thus, unfocused support personnel and teachers.

Systemic psychology is one of the most promising systems approaches available today. It also seems to be one of the best suited for the public schools. This book provides rationale for each of these claims. The core of the volume is concerned with presentation of basic systemic ideas and the elaboration of a model for systemic practice in the schools.

The book is divided into two parts: The first provides an introduction to systems philosophy and theory, with emphasis on systemic thinking. The second section presents theory and method for a systemic approach to intervention in the schools.

Part 1 contains six chapters. Chapter One presents an introduction to systems theory through comment on the relationship of philosophy and science and the characteristics of Eastern and Western world views. Chapter Two illustrates examples of systems thinking in sciences other than psychology; the work of Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra, and Humberto Maturana is emphasized. Chapter Three concentrates on the history of systems thinking in psychology's past. Gestalt psychology, transactional functionalism, and field theory are connected to the pioneering work of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley.

Chapter Four discusses examples of systems work in community psychology. The pioneering theory and research of Roger Barker on behavior settings are connected to comments concerning "sense of community" and values in public policy. Chapter Five presents a description of systemic approaches to family therapy. The methods of the Milan Associates and the work of Lynn Hoffman, Brad Keeney, and Peggy Papp form the essence of the chapter. Chapter Six provides a list of fundamental systemic perspec-

tives. Each is explained in detail and practical methods are suggested for developing these specific ways of thinking.

Part 2 contains five chapters that focus on systems psychology applied to the school setting. Chapter Seven presents the special issues that must be considered as systemic theory and method are exported to the schools. Chapter Eight describes systemic strategies that are particularly adaptable to the schools and provides suggestions for the establishment of the intervention team that might carry them out. Chapter Nine presents a case simulation. Highlights of the case are described from team formation through the conclusion of the intervention period.

Chapter Ten outlines representative examples of promising approaches to nonsystemic systems psychology in the schools. Each of these systems models is categorized as an ecosystem, liaison, school psychology, or systemic-related approach. Chapter Eleven provides comments on the history of the systems movement as it relates to future possibilities.

In addition to presenting in-depth consideration of a particular kind of systems psychology, the book contains certain chapters that present alternate models and others that illustrate the use of these perspectives in settings other than schools and in sciences other than psychology. Thus, the treatment of systemic psychology for the schools is placed in context; history and current connections are important.

My experience with the ideas the reader will encounter in the following chapters has been marked over the years by times of frustration, joyful insight, challenge, and hope. At the moment, I hope that the results of my work will help to limit the reader's own frustration and to increase his or her periods of insight.

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PART 1

FUNDAMENTALS: PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY

During a golden age, almost everything that glitters is real gold.
—Ortega y Gasset

1

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is not the concern of those who pass through Divinity and Greats, but of those who pass through birth and death. If the ordinary man may not discuss existence, why should he be asked to conduct it?
—G. K. Chesterton

A new set of very interesting and promising ideas has begun to find its way to the cutting edge of most major scientific disciplines and many of the humanities as well. While it may be true that there is nothing really new under the sun, it is also reasonably true that these particular ideas are at least new under the Western sun. While some of them have been around for centuries in the East, their widespread emergence in the midst of Western science during recent times has been remarkable and dramatic.

In psychology, these ideas currently are called by a variety of names. The terms *systems psychology* and *systemic psychology* are becoming somewhat conventional and are the labels most often used throughout this volume. However, various other terms seem to be sufficiently descriptive and occasionally, perhaps, more precise; therefore, the topic of what to call this new theoretical perspective receives some detailed consideration from time to time throughout the following chapters. Rather than adopting a standard linear way of looking at the thoughts and feelings of human beings and the ways they behave in groups, this newer thinking is much more concerned with *patterns* of functioning. Searching for the causes of human activity ceases to be important. Inductive and deductive logic make room for other types of rationality, such as reasoning by analogy. Understanding human language patterns is critical. Everything is viewed as dynamic rather than static. Spontaneous change can be expected under certain circumstances. Working with wholes instead of pieces of the whole is fundamental. While this list of concepts does not represent the entire set of principles that form the web of interconnecting notions supporting systems theory, they give the flavor of what the excitement is all about.

Originally in the development of psychology some of the systems-oriented ideas were of practical value in research on visual perception. Later, their applicability was tested in clinical and community psychology. Today, the

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