Interpersonal Systems Theory
by
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Part I: Introduction

How Does Systems Theory Apply to Interpersonal Relationships?

When people join together for any purpose, the resulting relationship or group becomes a living, breathing, growing entity. Whether this joining is for a romantic partnership, a family, a working group, an organization or a community, the connections between its members become channels that provide flows of energy that each individual and relationship entity feeds off of and contributes back into, like blood vessels. Relationships and groups are also living in that they breathe, eat, excrete and change – just like all living creatures or living systems.

Once one is able to see relationships and groups as living beings, many of their idiosyncrasies make more sense. People generally understand that individuals have needs, feelings and boundaries, but many become confused when relationships have needs and paths that are in competition with individual needs and goals. Most people also accept that that individuals change in various ways over time, but are not able to accept that relationships change, grow and decline in their own ways as well. Somehow, relationships or group needs must be considered, and *balanced* with

individual needs. Unfortunately, many people do not see the forces and elements involved to be able to create this balance.

The tool that helps us see the elements and dynamics of relationships between people and groups is Systems Theory, which has been reconceptualized here as Interpersonal Systems Theory. Interpersonal Systems Theory links systems thinking with interpersonal psychology (group dynamics, social psychology, interpersonal theories and family systems theory). Interpersonal Systems Theory reveals the commonalities and connections between relationships and groups with all life forms. Learning to see interpersonal relationships as systems will radically change the way one looks at them.

One of the most astonishing things about Systems Theory is how it finds commonalities between individual beings, parts of beings (organs, cells, nerves, etc.), and groups of beings (ecosystems, families, groups, organizations, etc.). This paper will address the latter; the application of systems properties and forces to groups of human beings, whether that group consist of two individuals or millions.

Interpersonal Systems Theory strives to understand the complicated world of relationships and groups through systems thinking. Systems Theory sees the universe as composed completely of living systems which connect, work together and evolve over time. Since everything living is a system, this includes all groupings of beings including relationships, groups, organizations and states. Once one understands the basic elements, flows and balances of systems, one has a key to understanding all kinds of relationship phenomena.

Groups & Relationships are Systems

Interpersonal systems have human elements, dynamics, and patterns that are intrinsically connected to everything human and to nature. Relationship systems are constantly interacting and changing both within and between themselves. While relationship and group boundaries provide stability, these boundaries are open to the flow of various life forces which push and pull on it.

Systems Theory has much to offer to the understanding of relationships and groups, primarily by pointing out that relationships are having to cope with a stormy sea of changes inside and outside themselves. Systems processes and concepts help us to see that there is an ebb and flow of different forces that push for these changes, or work to repress them. The systems concepts of growth cycles and life cycles help us to understand the pain, chaos, awkwardness and risk that are inevitable and necessary for relationship health and productivity over time.

Part II: Major Interpersonal Systems Properties

Seeing groups and relationships as systems means seeing their living dynamics. This means seeing how these interpersonal systems connect with their environments in order to breathe, eat, and take in energy, as well as to expel carbon dioxide and waste. These exchanges may be on the physical level (food, water) or the energetic level (communication, information, social connection). Interpersonal systems also need to exchange information in order to understand their internal and external environments and to monitor how they are changing. The internal and external environments of relationship systems change constantly, so the resources they exchange will also vary.

There are numerous psychological properties of human groups and relationships that fit with systems thinking quite seamlessly. Presented here is a list of systems properties which apply to relationships, groups and other forms of interpersonal systems:

Table 1: Interpersonal Systems Properties

	Property	*Description*
1.	**Holistic**	Systems act, move, give and take as wholes.
2.	**Interconnected through Flow**	Systems are interconnected through a flow of energy, matter & information that they feed on & feed into, so they are interdependent.
3.	**Always Changing**	Systems are constantly involved in short-term change cycles and are changed by the life-cycle.
4.	**Pattern-Dependent**	Systems self-stabilize by creating patterns to organize and channel flow.
5.	**Expanding & Contracting**	Systems alternately expand & contract in their openness to change & to the environment.

Interpersonal Systems are Holistic

As humans, we need social bonds and relationships for our emotional well-being. Most people have strong bonds with a number of formal and informal groups such as couples, families, circles of friends, work groups, church groups and communities. Each relationship taken on changes and challenges us. When positive, relationships provide

support and make us stronger to face the stresses of life. When negative, relationships can cause emotional imbalance, physical illness or even death.

When people come together for any purpose for a period of time, a psychological boundary develops around them and separates them from other people. This boundary has a unifying force, which makes those within it act to some degree as a unit, a whole. When people form a relationship or join a group, they gradually become more dependent on each other and must move, interact and change together because their outcomes become connected. Capra thinks that holism is the most crucial aspect of understanding systems, because when anything is dissected, the processes which keep it alive are destroyed. The same is true for relationships – focusing on the people within them loses so much of what relationships are about.

One way to see this is to pay attention to how group behavior is often quite different from individual behavior. Groups of nice children can become cruel to a weaker child or to an animal. A group of physically weak students can practice a sport, empower one another and become a winning team. Alcoholics and addicts can find the strength to change in a support group when alone they are unable to give up their addictions.

People are routinely changed by relationships, and often act differently depending on the group milieu around them. Family experts have learned that the health of the whole family must be improved in order to help individual family members become healthier. This interpersonal climate phenomenon in families also holds true for all groups and relationships, from marriages to friendships to organizations to nations – the interpersonal climate affects the well-being of the individuals within it. We can take a

more powerful role in shaping the climate of the relationships and groups we belong to once we are able to see them as systems.

To monitor and understand our relationships and groups, we need to shift our awareness to see beyond our own needs to be able to see relational and/or group needs, because this give us information about relationship or group health. Married couples have to give a lot of attention to their marriages, while family members often talk about the demands and stresses of the family. Most people pay attention to their communities through reading the paper or listening to the news about the events which affect them.

Interpersonal Systems theory also believes in the complimentarity of a system's members. Complimentarity means that each member of a group or relationship makes a beneficial contribution of energy and ideas which are not available otherwise. Each member is needed and when we work together well, we produce the optimal balance of forces for survival and health. So, no individual member of a relationship or group is there by accident or without a purpose.

Interpersonal Systems are Interconnected through Flow

A relationship system's members are so deeply interconnected by the communication and energy flow between them that they are strongly affected by each other. In addition, each relationship system is affected by other interpersonal systems outside of it, especially those nearby and those it is a member of (church, job, community, culture). Together we form a human ecosystem where our interconnections occur on numerous levels, including politically, socially, financially, culturally and ecologically.

Flow between people is like a magnetic and dynamic energy force that binds them together and impacts them so they feel each others dramas. Belonging to a relationship or group makes one subject to the influences of other members and of the relationship unit through the impact of their psychological, social and physical flow. The strength and emotional quality of that magnetic-energetic force varies greatly from relationship to relationship and each develops their own relationship climate based on their shared drama and coping history.

Interpersonal Systems Are Always Changing

Interpersonal systems are impacted tremendously by this continuous flow which gives and receives resources (energy, information, nutrients, and waste) within themselves and with other groups. As numerous channels of flow move through each individual, this stresses and impacts their energy core, causing vibrations (known in systems as perturbations).

These impact vibrations increase in amplitude and disagreeableness according to the degree of dissonance between the individual's structure and the new information. The greater the amplitude and discord which result from these fluctuations, the more likely this will provoke change in the in the whole or in part of the relationship system.

A short-term change cycle results from the movement between stability, to stressor, to dissonance, to change. This change cycle is constantly helping relationships and groups to adapt to the sea of changes within and around them.

Systems also experience tremendous changes as they move through the life cycle. Although the life span of interpersonal systems is not always biologically limited (as in organizations and nations), there are still forces which shape them in similar

ways. The interpersonal system life cycle includes a vulnerable early stage, early growth period, a mature stage, and eventually rigidity and dysfunction leading to inviability.

So, interpersonal systems experience a tremendous amount of change which challenges their stability and their survival. The kinds of changes they experience fall into two general categories: a. the change cycle, and b. the life cycle.

A. The Change Cycle

With every moment, systems are considering change; avoiding it, approaching it, in change, in recovery from change, or moving on after changing. The systems change cycle starts with receiving feedback about changes occurring somewhere (e.g. in a member or outside system) that challenges or perturbs its present structure. This challenging change feedback continues to impact relationship systems with every wave of flow and leading to a period of increased flux and chaos as they struggle with the informational dissonance. The disturbing information accumulates until the system suppresses that perturbing flux and chaos, or takes the risk to change.

With change there may come growth, expansion and evolution to greater complexity, or retraction with the possibility of collapse. Growth leads to greater capacity, strength, durability and adaptability to the demands of life and the environment, while decline means decreased adaptability and capacity.

1. Change Starts with Perturbations

Feedback which tells a relationship system that the inner or outer environment is changing will cause vibrations, or perturbations in the system or in one or more of its members. Perturbations result because this feedback is challenging to what we know

and do. That information dissonance causes our energy field to become disturbed and it makes us frown with the energy of trying to figure out what it means.

Perturbations cause energy waves, and they create charges of energy, excitation or movement, like stirring the pot. Perturbations are inherently disturbing, and while the system will bring its self-stabilizing drive to dampen the vibrations, perturbations in any direction will attract other perturbations towards the same goal, and together they push the entity towards change.

2. Chaos

Chaos is a state where traditional order starts to break down, and it is usually a difficult and stimulating time. Chaos is created by the system receiving enough change feedback and perturbations to disrupt its boundaries and other structural elements, so that they no longer are able to maintain control of system dynamics. Some chaos is necessary in all life because growth requires that old structures let go and new structures (or parts of structures) take their place. Chaos takes over in the gap between the disruption of the old and the establishment of balance in the new structure.

3. The Bifurcation or Turning Point

The bifurcation point is the moment in time when perturbations, chaos and other pressures push the system boundary, rules and structures to let go to some degree. It is the point where the system is at the edge, the existential moment of turning back from change and or choosing change while not knowing what is to come next. The system is then at a turning point, with the crucial choice being whether to return to the old stability or move on to new possibilities.

Transitions are usually very difficult times because the system lacks the safety provided by the old structure and the safety available under the new structure is yet unknown. Also, during times of transition, flow dynamics tend to be both chaotic and intense in speed and energy charge, and that intensity can be difficult and exhausting.

4. Readjustment

Generally, there is a time of great vulnerability right after changes occur. Some relationships or groups collapse after changing, or find they must retreat from the growth level they intended to achieve. So it takes a period of time before the system returns to homeostasis.

B. Lifespan Stages

Each relationship system travels through a life cycle that may be physically limited or based on psychological and social factors. Systems begin with a burst of energy and are very vulnerable at first since their needs outweigh their protections. As they mature, systems channel their energy more productively and become more independent. Maturity is reached when they are autonomous and can manage their own needs without a caregiver.

As interpersonal systems age, in general, they become more mechanized and pattern oriented, which leads to greater stability and efficiency in handling energy dynamics, but also leads to rigidity and lowered adaptability over time. The system's growing rigidity in its patterns tends to make it unable to discern subtle messages or demands, thus decreasing its sensitivity and creativity. Throughout nature, one can see the principle of flexibility associated with youth while rigidity is associated with aging, vulnerability and death.

So the lifespan development of interpersonal systems is seen as including:

1. Birth & Infancy; the decision to come together and define 2 or more people as a relationship or group.
2. Early Development; the time spent developing trust, establishing norms and learning basic survival tasks.
3. Adolescence; the stage of boundary testing and power struggles.
4. Maturity; the time when norms and boundaries are established and members accept responsibility to work towards goals.
5. Aging; the period after boundaries and patterns have started to prevent change and innovation, decreasing adaptability.
6. Disintegration; the final phase when the relationship or group is no longer viable (able to continue).

Group scholars such as Tuckman and Caple have elaborated stage theories for the

development of therapy groups which are quite consistent with these Systems Theory

notions of development.

Interpersonal Systems Are Pattern-Dependent

To cope with the stormy array of changes they have to cope with, interpersonal

systems have a self-organizing nature which works to maintain stability and minimize

threats from internal and external sources. The way that relationships and groups

stabilize themselves and cope with the pressure of all these changes, is to create

patterns – patterns to meet needs, cope with stress and conflict, and to deal with

demands from the outside. This drive to form and follow patterns is the most common

means for maintaining stability, or homeostasis, in relationship systems.

Over time, the spontaneity of relationships and groups is replaced by reliance on

patterns, until over time they grow more and more pattern dependent. This is

exacerbated by the natural bias against change unless there is great pressure from the

environment or internal dynamics. Unfortunately, many relationships and groups move

into fixed patterns and lose their willingness to change, leading to marital ruts, lifeless group dynamics and rigid, life-sapping organizations.

Interpersonal Systems Expand & Contract

A push-pull dynamic exists in systems because of the intense internal and external pressure for change, and the pressure for patterns and stability. Systems need both stability and change to survive and to move towards goals. The way that systems balance these two diverse drives is to alternate them, through a kind of breathing which alternately opens and closes, expands and contracts.

So, relationships and groups also breathe, open and close, expand and contract. At the same time that a relationship or group is laboring to avoid change, they need to change to adapt to everything inside and outside it which is changing in big and small ways, so the pressure to change is almost constantly in competition with that stability seeking nature. But when these two forces are able to work together, a balance occurs that is akin to the rhythm of life.

Marriage and family therapists often deal with conflicts over the balance between spending time at home with each other and spending time away to socialize. This can remain a major source of relationship conflict unless they can find a way to harmonize the relationship's rhythm for opening and closing. Both classrooms and therapy group members benefit much more when the influence of experts is balanced with internal discussion time.

Part III: Flow & Flow Dynamics

The most aspect of Interpersonal Systems Theory is Flow. Flow on the first level is a powerful, energetic and magnetic life force that moves between and within

relationships and groups and has major effects on their functioning and well-being. The

next level of flow has four major dynamics that underlie the functioning of relationships

and groups; control, flow, support, change feedback, and stability feedback.

Table 2: Flow & Flow Dynamics

	Flow	The constant exchange of energy & information that brings renewal.
	Flow Dynamics	The different forces which make up flow.
1.	**Control & Are Controlled**	Systems maintain boundaries & structures to channel & regulate energy & information.
2.	**Support & Are Supported**	Systems nurture & give energy to young entities, other systems & those that are ailing.
3.	**Give & Receive Change Feedback**	Systems communicate with each other about needs, about how they impact each other, & request adjustments.
4.	**Give & Receive Stability Feedback**	Systems pressure each other not to change - to maintain structures and patterns as they are.

Flow

Flow, is movement of energy inside, outside and through relationship boundaries,

akin to the movement of body fluids. This concept of flow was developed 20 years ago

by a committee investigating the applications of systems theory to group counseling

(Durkin, 1981).

Degree of flow between people is a sign of vitality of the relationship or group,

though this has limits. Flow that is too fast could create instability and lead to exhaustion

and collapse. Flow that is consistently too slow and sluggish would signal dysfunction or

decline in a relationship. Interpersonal flow movements can be very strong (forceful) or

soft (gentle, quiet) for periods of time, but a preponderance of either extreme would be

overwhelming and/or lead to inflexibility. The optimum flow between people would average out to moderate intensity, but include a variety of intensities, with periods of strong, moderate and gentle stimulation.

There are other properties of system flow that need to be observed for signs of imbalance in relationship and group dynamics. Flow needs to be balanced in exchange inside and outside the system boundaries, so that giving and taking should be relatively balanced within relationships and groups, and between an interpersonal system and other systems. Balanced flow pressure keeps system boundaries healthy and intact. Flow also needs to be balanced in the push for change versus the push for stability. Another property of flow that needs to be balanced would be freedom of movement (creativity) versus patterning or channeling of movement.

Communication is the main instrument of flow, whether verbal, nonverbal, direct, or indirect. Work and resource distribution (especially feeding and eating) are also forms of flow. Interpersonal systems theory emphasizes two main purposes of flow communication; the exchange of information (feedback) and the exchange of resources (energy, support and feelings).

Flow Dynamics

Flow is made up of at least four dynamics; control, support, change feedback and stability feedback. These four dynamics represent needs that should be met and forces that need to be in balance for optimal health in interpersonal systems. These four dimensions can be used to analyze interpersonal functioning, and then will give guidance to those who want to intervene to help relationships and groups work better or to overcome difficulties

Communication within a system and between systems contains information about system functioning, needs, relationships and environmental conditions. Systems thinking considers this information to be either negative or positive feedback, meaning either supporting current system structure and dynamics or challenging the system to change them. Because this contradicts common understandings of positive and negative, the systems concepts of positive and negative feedback are confusing for many people. To maintain clarity, Interpersonal Systems Theory will use the terms *change feedback* and *stability feedback*.

In essence, one major function of feedback is either to provoke change, or suppress change in the way the system maintains its balance. There is information about the need for change and stability in every interaction, whether direct, indirect, verbal, or nonverbal. Every exchange within a system or between a system and its environment gives it information about the need to adjust its course or to maintain stability or homeostasis.

Communication in interpersonal systems (and many animal systems which are not covered by this theory) also has control functions and nurturing functions. Research on many mammals, such as wolves, finds nurturing, and limit setting to be common goals of their interactions. Family scholars have also identified nurturing, support, guidance and limit-setting as primary categories of significant interactions.

1. Control

Control is a major dynamic that has been identified in the psychology of interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. Control is exerted primarily through the enforcement of boundaries (limits), but also through structural mechanisms such as

rules and roles (leader, boss), which provide direction, guidance and safety for the interpersonal system and for its members. There are many negative associations with the dynamic of control because of its association with over-control, but the dynamic is motivated by protection. Control is concerned with safety and managing of that sea of change and other countless demands on individuals and relationships.

The level of control present in a system's dynamics (or in a particular situation) varies from extreme under-control to extreme over-control, with both extremes being unhealthy. At one end of the continuum, there are numerous interpersonal conditions and contexts that become out of balance from lack of control, making them vulnerable to fall into chaos and inertia. At the other extreme are those conditions and contexts which suffer from over-control, commonly resulting in abuse, stifled creativity and anger at the loss of individual freedom.

Parents use control to provide limits and guidance for their children and keep them safe, but they also must teach their children to develop their own self-control. To be renewable, a group system must pass on rules and mechanisms of control to younger members. The healthiest groups also seem to have mechanisms of control and boundaries that evolve over time in response to feedback from inside and outside of the group, because the only way to maintain balance is to consider changes that may be needed.

The ideal management of control in an interpersonal system would consciously strive for some form of equality and democracy, because it is clear that access to control is as essential as access to water for psychological health on all levels of interpersonal systems. This style of control management would mean ensuring that all

members have certain basic rights (e.g. free speech, freedom from abuse) and

responsibilities (doing one's part). This would mean allocating as much control to each

system member as they can handle, even to the point of stretching their capacity for

responsibility, in order to spur their growth and maturity and to keep the whole system

healthy.

Boundaries. A major systems concept is that of boundaries, psychological limits which

define and separate group and relationship systems, but must be flexible and

permeable. Boundaries define system limitations and keep relationship needs protected

but are open to allow connections to other systems and to the environment.

Structure. Structure means the physical and psychological constraints and guides of

flow patterns within, through and outside of systems. Structures include physical

infrastructure, and power roles and rules, especially those for managing boundaries.

Structure serves to direct energy, to channel it in certain directions. The configuration of

these and the system boundary eventually shape the flow of system dynamics into

patterns.

2. Support

Support means providing positive energy, support and safety to others. Support

was introduced to systems theory through the work of the American Group

Psychotherapy Association's General System Theory Committee, who came up with the

concept "nurtenergy…as a guided catalytic force and as a lubricant of the group

process" that is demonstrated by "being caring and actively injecting positive concern"

(Durkin, 1981, p. 87)

Support (also known as caring, love, and nurturing) is so inherently necessary in the psychology of relationships, that it is a dominant factor in relationship and group health. Nurturing, social support and love are known to be necessary factors in the healthy raising of children, and they help human beings survive during times of stress and trauma. Support is the major ingredient in group cohesion, which is the factor found to be most important for positive outcome in group therapy.

3. Change Feedback

Change feedback is information conveyed to systems from the internal and external environment about the changes that are occurring there and how those changes relate to the system's current status. This information eventually triggers change because systems realize that adjustments are needed for adapting to those changes. Change and adaptation are necessary for systems to survive and to move towards goals, and this change will help them to function in balance with their internal and external environments.

Change feedback gives interpersonal systems information about what they need to change to reduce discord and produce harmony in relation to what is happening with their own members, or relative to external relationships and groups. Some system theorists consider change feedback to be "balancing feedback" because it keeps the system in balance so that it can survive and move towards its goals. This is definitely true of relationships, which stagnate or become abusive when the need to change is not heard and responded to.

Healthy relationships and groups are able to take in dissonant information from within and without and use it as information for growth. No relationship or group

structure is perfect and 'the way things are' should not be fixed in time. As individuals and environments change, relationships change, and the interaction between these should be a flow instead of a damn that has to explode now and then from the pressure.

4. Stability Feedback

Stability is equally crucial to survival and it is only by balancing change and structural continuity that a system can exist. Too much change could threaten the integrity of systemic elements and the system could be swept away. So, feedback about stability needs is also essential for living systems.

Stability feedback for relationships and groups would notify them when their stability is threatened by too much change. Even when an interpersonal system is going strong, too much change or change that is too dissonant with its goals could cause some damage. For example, a strong marriage of a wealthy couple could fall apart if they experienced a trauma that was serious enough, such as financial ruin or severe illness.

When a relationship or group is in a fragile state, it might be better to back away from all but the most minimum and necessary changes. Businesses are usually advised not to move locations when they are still struggling to survive, as the stress is often too overwhelming. Newly committed couples are much less likely than older couples to weather common relationship stressors such as changing jobs or ugly behavior from in-laws.

Summary

Seeing relationships and groups as living, breathing systems will help us understand how they change, grow, and get sick. Flow and its four dimensions hold the

key to understanding interpersonal systems, by helping us to see how relationships and groups sustain themselves, move and cope as living systems. By understanding how these flow dimensions move within and between relationships and groups large and small, we can understand how relationships and groups get out of balance and become unhealthy. This will help us understand what is needed to bring healthy functioning and resiliency back to those relationships and groups.

It is hoped that this paper will serve as a bridge between conventional psychological thought about relationships and the world of systems theory. While interpersonal psychology is finally gaining its place in scholarly circles, adding systems to it could bring it more of a living quality and more avenues to explore.

Clearly it is time to research these concepts to broaden our understanding of them and make them more useful. Perhaps research can clarify the true nature of how interpersonal systems work.

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