

Chapter 3

Interactional Theory

3.1 Introduction

In 1989 Claiborn and Lichtenberg provided a coherent framework for the understanding of interactional thought, though they declined the claim that their intention was to provide a theoretical view of interactional counselling. Nevertheless, they did contribute to an understanding of interactional concepts. These include the definitions of interaction, personality, communication, systems and disordered behaviour.

3.2 Definition of interaction

Claiborn and Lichtenberg (1989) say that the concept of interaction has two meanings. The first is the idea that man's behaviour is "... jointly influenced by person (or trait) and situation (or environment) variables. The second meaning refers to "... the behaviour with one another, as in interpersonal interaction" (p. 356). They conclude, taking both these views into account, by saying that "... in an interactional view... behaviour is considered to be simultaneously influenced by the person's view of the world- interpretations, expectations, and choices- and by the world the person is viewing, particularly the behaviour of others with regard to the person" (p. 356).

From their theoretical conceptual framework, they have explained the concept of personality and defined the concept according to Endler and Magnusson's characterisation of an interactional view of personality in 1976. These are:

- a) Behaviour is determined by a continuous process of interaction between the individual and the situation he [or she] encounters (feedback).

- a) The individual is an interactional, active agent in this interaction process.
- b) Cognitive factors are important in this interaction.
- c) The psychological meaning of the situation to the individual is an essential determinant of behaviour.

(Endler & Magnusson, 1976, p. 12, in Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989, p. 356)

This means that the concept of personality, often viewed as the social aspect of a person, or his general behavioural characteristics or 'basic' nature are more than these popular views. Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (1997) define personality as "... die gedurig veranderende, maar tog stabiele, organisasie van alle ligmaamlike, psigiese en geestelike eienskappe van die individu wat sy of haar gedrag bepaal, in interaksie met die konteks waarbinne die persoon hom of haar bevind" (1997, p. 12).

The emphasis here is slightly different from the Endler and Magnusson view. They lean towards the "stable organisation" of personality, while Claiborn and Lichtenberg's idea is a personality of "continuous interactional process" with the exception that behaviour is determined by the psychological meaning of a situation by an individual.

In a similar way, Jackson (1977, p.2) refers to Shibutani (1961) who says:

...many of things men do take a certain form not so much from instincts as from necessity of adjusting to their fellows... What characterises the interactional approach is the contention that human nature and the social order are products of communication... The direction taken by a person's conduct is seen as something that is constructed in the reciprocal give- and- take of interdependent men who are adjusting to one another. Further, a man's personality- those distinctive behavioural patterns that

characterise a given individual- is regarded as developing and being reaffirmed from day- to- day in his interaction with his associates.

(In Watzlawick & Weakland, 1977)

From the above, the assumptions of the interactional theory are seen as:

- (a) Individual personality, character and deviance are shaped by an individual's relationships with others;
- (b) a person's distinctive patterns of behaviour which characterises a specific person are those developed and reaffirmed continuously during his life by others, and
- (c) human nature and the social order are products of communication.

The DSM-IV (APA, 1994) describes a personality disorder as an “enduring *pattern* of inner experience and *behavior* that *deviates* markedly from the *expectations* of the individual's *culture...*” (p. 629, italics added). It further states “[p]ersonality traits are enduring patterns of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and oneself that are exhibited in a wide range of social and personal contexts” (p. 630).

The interactional approach views personality traits as components of relationships, these affect how the person experiences others and also how he or she allows others to experiencing them. Personality traits therefore become relationship traits. This shifts the focus from ‘why’ a behaviour occurs to, ‘how’ or ‘for what purpose’ does a behaviour occur (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989; Swart & Wiehahn, 1979).

From these assumptions, the theory of interactional thinking states that a person can not other than be continuously and interactionally entangled with others. This interactional process confirms and reaffirms who he or she is, and will determine the person's distinctive behaviours. Lastly, which seems to be very pertinent, these interactions of people and their communications shape human nature and the social order.

Some personality theories focus on the early development of the individual, such as Freudian and Neo-Freudian theories, others emphasize learning processes as is the case with behaviourists, and phenomenologists describe behaviour as the answer which the individual ascribes to his or her world. However different these approaches may seem, they share a common element, all these theories include an element of interaction (Swart & Wiehahn, 1979). Even Millon's (Millon, 1996; Millon & Davis, 1996) theory of personality and classification, focuses on the interpersonal behaviour of the various personality disorders.

From this point of view then, the psychologist needs to come to an understanding of the client's interactions with his world. He or she needs to gather certain information that hopefully answers questions from the psychologist's theoretical framework. While traditional psychologist's would try to diagnose the person, the interactional, psychologist tried to gain an understanding of what maintains the problem and the person's interactional role in the system. He or she then aims to analyse the interactions of the client(s). One can almost call this a method of 'diagnosing' the system instead of the person.

Although this is today not an entirely 'new' manner of conceptualisation, as Watzlawick and Weakland described it in 1977, the way forward in this thesis is to apply these concepts within

a broader framework of extreme behavioural patterns such as serial murder. This means that human beings nature and the 'social order' is also shaped by pathological patterns of behaviour, in the sense that all behaviour is defined within a social network which we inhabit (Haley, 1967).

Although no super- theory in clinical behaviour will be arrived at, one may arrive at a point which may serve as a guide towards the understanding of this complex phenomenon: clinical interactional behaviour with the specific emphasis on serial murder.

3.3 Theoretical view

Claiborn and Lichtenberg (1989) disclose five major areas of interactional thought. Namely, reciprocal causality, the communicational view of behaviour, the organisation of interactions into sequences that have characteristic patterns and accompanying interpersonal perceptions, how relationships are formed and maintained through interpersonal interaction and the concept of relationship as related to cybernetic principles.

In this exposition of interactional theory these five areas will be briefly explained, in addition to these attention will be given to disordered behaviour and dysfunctional systems.

3.3.1 Reciprocal causality

In contrast to a linear causality, reciprocal causality means that the person(s) and situation(s) variables affect each other in an ongoing, circular (or multidirectional) way and that each variable in the process functions as both cause and effect (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989). From this point of view it is difficult to take a linear stance, which may be arbitrary (Carson, 1969) and is basically the idea of how participants perceive their interactions. These, at best, can be defined

as punctuations of behaviour at a certain point in time.

3.3.2 Communicational concepts

The interactional approach can be seen as developing from communication theory and systems thinking. The communications approach to psychotherapy emerged from two interrelated research projects. The first was from the Double Bind Communications Project begun in 1952 involving Bateson, Haley, Weakland and Jackson as a consultant. The second was from research done by the Mental Research Institute (MRI) founded by Jackson in 1958 with Satir and Watzlawick as important members involved. Both these closely related projects shared the common assumption that communication is the key to the understanding of human behaviour (Prochaska & Norcross, 1994).

While the focus of this early research was on families, this did not make the findings irrelevant to individual psychology. Jackson (1965) of MRI states that even if the object of study is the family unit, any examination of the characteristics of the various individual family members remains in the realm of individual theory. It is the shift to interactions that allows one to therefore apply this approach to smaller units such as a dyad of therapist and client. By punctuating a sequence of events one can isolate interaction and determine interventions that will lead to a different effect on the interaction. Changes in one part of a system can lead to change in another part (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991). The implication is that one need not work with all the members, such as a family, to bring about change in the whole system.

Thus the interactional view leans heavily on communication theory. One of the most important concepts of communication theory is that all forms of behaviour can be seen as having message

value. This means that messages, as ways of communication, are continuous: one cannot escape from communicating, everything one does is a form of communication. Sometimes one's silence says more than volumes of literature. Depending on the people involved, the same look can take on different meanings. A look between two lovers means something completely different than a look between two arch-enemies. What makes the difference is the type of relationship 'between', the two people involved create the context and meaning of the look. Investigation into these communication patterns that exist will allow the researcher to hopefully identify those patterns that may lead to pathogenic forms of interaction (Nardone & Watzlawick, 1993). This also means that one cannot escape influencing others or being influenced (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989).

Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) came to the following five conclusions about human communication:

- i) It is impossible not to communicate.
- ii) Every communication has both a content and a relational aspect.
- iii) The nature of the relationship depends on how the participants punctuate the sequence of their behaviour.
- iv) Communication can be both digital and analogic.
- v) Communication is either symmetrical or complementary.

These relationships are expressed through communication, the messages we send to one another. These messages shape the nature and future of the relationships we have with others and can occur verbally and non-verbally. The acceptance or rejection of messages therefore helps to define what is appropriate behaviour in that specific relationship, in other words, what roles each

participant will play in the relationship (Haley, 1990). The acceptance of the message can occur in two forms, firstly, total acquiescence of the definition or, secondly, the person qualifies his acceptance with the message that although he has allowed the other person to define the relationship, he is letting the other person do so (Swart & Wiehahn, 1979).

Rejection of the message is the other option available, this occurs when a person rejects the 'proposed' definition. The person who defines the relationship is said to be in control of the relationship, this control can change hands since relationships are dynamic in nature (Haley, 1990). One can view the psychiatrist- patient relationship as an example. A psychiatrist imposes a diagnostic label on a patient, if a patient rejects this then often the diagnosis is seen as being confirmed, or a new diagnosis is imposed by the psychiatrist. On the other hand, many patients allow the psychiatrist to imposed such labels upon them. In either case the psychiatrist is seen as being in the 'control' position.

Relationships can be seen as being either symmetrical or complimentary. A symmetrical relationship exists when the two parties give similar messages to each other, effectively exchanging the same behaviour. Here there is competition for control since neither accepts the definition of the other. A complementary relationship exists when the definition is accepted by both parties and the ensuing messages continue to reaffirm the definition (Hanson, 1995, Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967).

3.3.3 Patterns of interaction

Claiborn and Lichtenberg (1989, p. 363) state that "Interactions are not random, they are highly organised exchanges", which also includes the interactants' cognitive construction of the

interaction. According to these authors the primary function of interaction is the continuous confirmation of self, which means that all interaction “emanates from and returns to the self” (p. 363).

But as messages of interaction are exchanged, these form sequences, which Watzlawick et al. (1967) describe as stochastic processes- nonrandom chains of events, in which some affect the probabilities of other events (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989). Claiborn and Lichtenberg then state that because of the nonrandomness, the sequence exhibits regularities or redundancy. They explain as follows:

Redundancy in the exchange of messages make for patterns of interaction, which are... essential for... any kind of meaningful exchange and... for forming a relationship. Patterns provide stability in interaction... is often taken to represent the “rules’ of a relationship or system (p. 363)

The process of contrasting interactional sequences is called punctuation which is in essence the way interactants perceptually organise events in their unique sequence (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989). The roles which people usually ascribe to themselves rest on the way in which they punctuate interactional sequences which then become a description of the nature of the relationship.

3.3.4 Relationship functioning

A relationship definition determines what takes place in a relationship and what does not. It regulates the process of interaction as well as the outcomes of the interaction. Carson (1969) refers to the relationship definition as a kind of implicit interpersonal contract. Carson (1969) also

says, referring to long-term relationships such as marriage, that there is some stability in the basic position that each partner occupies vis-à-vis the other, even though there may be occasional adjustments in various specific joint activities.

3.3.5 System functioning

General Systems theory was first conceptualised by von Bertalanffy in 1937 but it was only towards the end of the Second World War that a major epistemological shift took place in Psychology. At the time people began to realise that many biological and non-biological phenomena shared the attributes of a system. This so-called 'new' epistemology was based on the concept of information and involves an understanding of the pattern, order and negentropy of the individual system in its broadest sense. These new epistemological principles are circular in nature and therefore feedback plays an important role. It was realised that communication and self-regulation through communication are essential for the functioning of a system. Information concerning the results of the system's past performance are reinserted into the system, altering its future functioning. This process is called self-corrective feedback (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991)

Individuals such as Gregory Bateson were instrumental in the formulation of this approach. He observed the relevance of this way of thinking to the description of human interaction. He was especially aware of the fundamental assumptions underlying general systems theory as explained by Buckley (1968) and Bertalanffy (1968). These assumptions stated that by observing systems it was possible to formulate rules that could explain the functioning of the interrelated parts. This was a move away from focusing on content, material substance, distribution of physical energy, to considering process, pattern, and communication as being the essential elements in description and explanation (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991). Ironically Bateson had no interest in family therapy

per se. His ultimate goal was to develop a unitary view of nature. Families and their communication patterns was just a short pause for him. He then moved on to study porpoises and their methods of communicating amongst themselves and their trainers (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991).

Coetsee (1996) lists the following 6 assumptions with regards to systems:

- i) They are made up of subsystems and are in turn part of a larger suprasystem.
- ii) Each of the subsystems have a purpose related to the survival of the whole.
- iii) A system operates according to certain general rules.
- iv) Systems have properties more than the sum of its individual parts.
- v) Communication and feedback mechanisms between the different parts are essential for the functioning of the system.
- vi) Growth and evolution are possible.

Von Bertalanffy (1950) further distinguishes between a closed system in which there is no interaction with surrounding environs and an open system which maintains itself through a constant exchange of materials with its environment and continuous building up and breaking down of the materials' components. Human interaction systems are regarded as open systems with the following characteristics:

i) Homeostasis: this refers to the permissibility of variation among the subsystems of a system, thus allowing the system maintain its identity

(Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974)

ii) Wholeness: a change in one part will cause a change in the whole system (Barker, 1986)

iii) Feedback characteristics: which can be positive or negative. Positive feedback causes

disruption and therefore change. Negative feedback keeps the system in a state of equilibrium (Watzlawick et al., 1974; Prochaska & Norcross, 1994). Servomechanisms: are automatic devices which correct the performance of a mechanism by means of error- sensing feedback (Prochaska & Norcross, 1994)

iv) Equifinality: the same end result may be achieved through changes in different parts (von Bertalanffy, 1950).

Systems therapies/ approaches maintain that the individual can only be understood in the social context in which they exist and to understand the functioning of whole organisms, one must study not only the separate parts of the organism but the *relationships between* those very parts (Prochaska & Norcross, 1994).

3.3.6 Disordered behaviour

The interactional approach is concerned with how individuals cope with the problems they experience in everyday -life, the interactions between individuals, and the perceptions and relations individuals experience within themselves, with others and the world. It is concerned with people 'in relation to' since one cannot be removed from a context (Haley, 1990; Nardone & Watzlawick, 1993). Since every person is involved in one or more context simultaneously more than one reality exists. Therefore every interpretative model that claims to hold an all encompassing, single truth as to the explanation of human behaviour will inevitably refute itself due to self- reference. If a theory finds confirmation within itself or through its own instruments it falls into the trap of becoming non- falsifiable. An example would be:

The dogmatic assumption that the discovery of the real causes of the present problem constitute a *conditio sine qua non* (essential condition) for change creates what the philosopher Karl Popper has called a self-sealing proposition; that is, a hypothesis that is validated both by its success and its failure and thus becomes unfalsifiable.

(Nardone & Watzlawick, 1993 p.2)

In essence the search for the cause of a problem becomes a never ending cycle only put to an end by a theory creating its own definition of what the answer should be.

The interactional view focuses on the interaction between individuals, themselves, and their world. These are organised into interactional patterns which may maintain a problem. Here lies the reason for the emphasis on process rather than content. The interactional view holds the assumption that an individual's rigid perceptive-reactive system leads to the individual applying one or more 'good solution' indiscriminately to a variety of problems (Nardone & Watzlawick; 1993, Watzlawick, 1997).

From the communication point of view, there are two types of phenomena which must be present for a psychiatric symptom to be a proper symptom: the patient's behaviour must be extreme in its influence on someone else and he must indicate in some way that he cannot help behaving as he does. The extreme behaviour does not have to be a particular type as long as it is extreme and therefore out of the ordinary. Usually symptoms fall into classes of opposites; for every symptom at one extreme there is a comparable one at another. Those people who cannot touch a doorknob and are called phobic are comparable to those people who must touch a doorknob six times before

turning it and are classed as compulsive (Haley, 1990).

From an interactional point of view one does not talk in terms of classification of mental illness, but rather in terms of the quality of the communication between people. Communication is optimal if both parties are open to the messages exchanged between them, and if both parties can express themselves freely and directly (Swart & Wiehahn, 1979). By implication then, a psychological problem exists when there is

- (a) a rigidity of roles,
- (b) a lack of openness, or
- (c) an inability to express freely and directly. (Swart & Wiehahn, 1979, p. 19)

Rigidity refers to an individual's inability to alter his or her interpersonal strategies to unique situations, while ignoring feedback from the context. This can be referred to as a 'closed system' since it doesn't allow new information in to allow for self-corrective behaviour (Hanson, 1995). Also, the individual's own behaviour helps shape the interpersonal situation, thus eliciting certain responses from the context, often in a complementary fashion, thus contributing to the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy. This then 'justifies' the individual's behaviour. This helps develop faulty cognitive construction of the environment or context (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989). It is for these reasons that an interactional analysis can help determine what the elements of the unique problematic situation are.

Psychological problems are almost exclusively seen as behaviours which are observable in interpersonal contexts (Haley, 1959). Problems from an individual perspective are inadequate or inappropriate interpersonal manoeuvres. Problems from a systems view, the focus is on the

function of the problem behaviour within the person's system. Claiborn and Lichtenberg (1989) give four characteristics to maladaptive individual behaviour. These are: rigidity of behaviour (i.e. due to insensitivity to feedback); when a person's own behaviour to some extent shapes the interpersonal situation (prompting others to respond with complementary behaviours and the maladaptive behaviour becomes self-fulfilling); faulty cognitive construction of the environment and lacks reciprocity and tends to become exploitive (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989).

The symptoms which are exhibited are like all behaviours, messages with content and relationship values. These symptoms can be a self-disqualification of meta-communications; transactional disqualification, which means an "incongruity in the response of one speaker in relation to the thesis (content) of the previous message of another" (Sluzki et al., 1967, p. 496, in Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989, p. 379); and by relationship control by means of the symptom, and by denying the control (Haley, 1963; Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989).

A specific systemic view of disordered behaviour was first formulated when clinical studies of schizophrenics' and their families were conducted. This view was to become known as the double-bind theory of schizophrenia. The double-bind research (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956) involved Bateson and his colleagues investigating families in which one of the members were expressing schizophrenic behaviour. They based their research on a part of communications theory termed the Theory of Logical Types by Russel (Whitehead & Russel, 1910). This theory's basic assumption is that there is discontinuity between a class and its members.

Related to interpersonal behaviour this means that there is a discrepancy between the communication and the meta-communication in human interaction. In Watzlawick et al.'s (1974) terms, this means a shift from one level to a higher one "...a shift, a discontinuity or transformation- in a word, a change-..." (p. 9). When studying communication certain pathogenic forms of interaction can be identified, for example, messages which contain two contradictory-mutually exclusive- orders, and which results in disturbed behaviour of the person in that interactional context, cannot leave (Nardone & Watzlawick, 1993). When double messages are given, the receiver has difficulty discerning between the two. The basic ingredients for such a situation are:

- (a) Two or more persons
- (b) Repeated experience.
- (c) A primary negative injunction.
- (d) A secondary injunction conflicting with the first at a more abstract level.
- (e) A tertiary injunction preventing the individual from escaping the field.
- (f) The individual is involved in an intense relationship that he or she feels they must accurately discriminate between messages.
- (g) The individual, or another member of the system, is unable to comment on the discrepancy (Bateson et al., 1956).

When these events occur then problematic behaviour will start to manifest itself. The relevance of this research at the time it was published is that it illustrated a shift from the intrapsychic focus to looking at relationships between people and the role that communication plays in the development of 'psychological' problems.

3.3.7 Dysfunctional systems

The dysfunctional systems' perspective emphasizes the controlling and disqualifying nature of symptoms with the primary focus on the systems', rather than the symptom's, dysfunctional character (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989). Dysfunctional relationships within a system are usually characterized by inflexible and rigid complementary relationships, for example double- bind situations; the members of such dysfunctional relationships have incongruent expectations; are exploitive, for example deceptive or paradoxical; these relationships involve sabotage and lastly, involve mutual disconfirmation (Claiborn & Lichtenberg, 1989). All of these characteristics apply to relationships and systems, such as families, which consist of many members.

This approach believes that the key to any psychological disorder lies in dysfunctional communications between the individual and those surrounding him or her. This led to a shift away from the individual as a self- contained unit to the individual as a system that interacts with other systems in a complex, structured network of relationships. This approach therefore says that "so- called psychopathological behaviour is not a problem of the individual, but a manifestation of pathological interaction between individuals" (Nardone & Watzlawick, 1993 p.38). Haley (1990) states that the ills of the individual are not separable from the ills of the social context created and inhabited by the individual. He further states that it would be incorrect to take the individual out of his cultural milieu and label him as sick or healthy. Therefore since one is in constant communication and interaction with one's environment and symptoms are a form of communication then society must take some of the responsibility for that very symptom. A symptom becomes a way of dealing with another person (Haley, 1990) and can allow a person to gain control over someone else.

3.4 Conclusion

All these theoretical and methodological contributions to the interactional view aim at trying to understand the individual in a context. The individual is not the focus but rather a part of a continually moving and changing organism. When some form of problem occurs these approaches look broader than the individual and therefore have a larger focus. Instead of looking at the person intra- psychically they look at how he is relating to his environment and what are the effects of his behaviour on those around him and vice versa.