4. FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Discussion will now turn to the concept of the family. Firstly, the author will examine definitions of the family, as they have appeared in dictionaries, contemporary sources and the South African literature. The author will then discuss family systems theory and elaborate upon the aspects of this theoretical approach that will be utilized to interpret the data in the current study. Finally, the author will provide a summarized version of the definitions and theoretical perspectives that will be used to inform the present study.

4.1 DEFINITION OF "THE FAMILY"

Arriving at a solid and universally applicable definition of the family is the subject of much debate, given the proliferation of family structures that have emerged in the greater part of the last century (Bell & Vogel, 1968). The author consulted three dictionary sources for definitions of the family and will now discuss these in further detail.

4.1.1 Dictionary definitions

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2005), *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2004) and the *Penguin Concise English Dictionary* (1992) were consulted for definitions of the family. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (2005) defines family in three possible ways, namely, as

- "the collective body of persons who live in one house, and under one head or manager; a household, including parents, children, and servants, and, as the case may be, lodgers or boarders" (p. 541),

- "the group comprising a husband and wife and their dependent children, constituting a fundamental unit in the organization of society" (p. 541), and

- "those who descend from one common progenitor" (p. 541).

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2004) defines the family as:

- "members of a household, parents, children, servants, etc" (p. 436),

- "set of parents and children, or of relations, living together or not" (p. 436), and

- "all descendants of common ancestor, house or lineage" (p. 436).

The *Penguin Concise English Dictionary* (1992) defines the family as:

- "a household, including dependants and servants" (p. 278)

- "a group of parents and children" (p. 278), and

- "a group of persons interrelated by blood and marriage" (p. 278).

The three dictionary sources of definitions of the family, when examined together, all appear to have three common types of definitions for the family. Additionally, all three sources appear to argue strongly towards a conception of the family that is very similar to notions of the nuclear family (discussed below).

On examining the types of definitions in each source, the following three types of definitions would appear to emerge across the sources. The first type seems to focus on the family as a household; the second type appears to define a family more in terms of the roles that this group is expected to play in society such as "organizational" (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, 2005) and in terms of fixed roles of parents and children; and the third type seems to focus on blood lineage, or ancestry as definitional criteria for a family.

These types will now be discussed in terms of their suitability to contemporary notions of family, as well as to the present study.

- **Family as household.**

The first type of definition makes allowance for servants, lodgers and boarders, in addition to traditional family members such as father, mother and children. This is useful in that frequently a person's psychological conception of family may not refer member-for-member to one's biological family, in that many of the above non-biological household members may play integral parts in helping the biological family function as an organizational unit in society, as stipulated by the second definition. Additionally, if one looks at the roles within a family such as father or mother, individuals who are not necessarily the biological parents of the individuals concerned may perform these.

However, as will be demonstrated below, the first type seems to be referring more to a household than a family. It is important to distinguish a household which refers to a spatial category where a group of people, or one person, is bound to a particular place from a family which entails blood and marriage ties (Muncie & Sapsford, 1995). These two terms cannot be used interchangeably because a family may form part of a household, but that household may not be exclusive to that family. For example, a family may rent a room to a lodger, or a member of the extended family may come and stay for a while.

A single family may also be spread over two households. For example, a husband may leave a family temporarily to go and work elsewhere, in which case he would reside at another household for a while. The first type would appear to be more suited to censuses and household surveys, where the household is the primary focus for data collection (Nam, 2004).

- **The family in terms of the function or role of its members.**

The second type introduces an important facet of the family, namely that the family performs certain functions in society, however, these functions may not be exclusively limited to the organization of society, as stated in the definition. The family may also provide emotional

support for its members, or act as a refuge from the pressures of society (Muncie & Sapsford, 1995). This definition also seems to be too narrow as it excludes extended family members such as grandparents and aunts or uncles.

The definition seems to be referring to what has come to signify the "nuclear family". The term nuclear family is laden with a number of normative assumptions, and has been mostly used to refer to a family type that consists of a married man and woman and their offspring (Murdock, 1968). This is distinguished from an extended family, which refers to two nuclear families affiliated through the extension of a parent-child relationship rather than that of husband-wife (Murdock, 1968). Unfortunately, studies that have limited their study of the family to the nuclear family have often missed out on the considerable impact that extended generations frequently have on the phenomenon of interest (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

- **Family as ancestry or blood lineage.**

The third type of definition would appear to define membership of a family in terms of common genetic links. This is also a bit exclusive in the sense that it would omit cases where families consist of adopted members or fostered members, as well as cases where individuals have remarried and formed a new family unit with their children from the previous marriages.

4.1.2 Summary of dictionary definitions

It would seem that the above definitions, on their own, are unsuitable as criteria for what constitutes as a family, especially with the emergence of alternative family types such as single parenting, same sex parenting, cohabitation, fostering and extended family and kin networks (Murdock, 1968).

However, the three types above are of use in the sense that they do capture a number of common themes in general understandings of "family", such as genetic or blood links, a common household and nuclear formation (father, mother and children). For this reason, the gestalt of the three definitions can be utilized with flexibility and awareness of the variations that may occur on this theme (such as those outlined above), as well as variations occurring on each definitional strand (such as a family with members living in two households). In other words, if used together with contemporary theoretical information concerning recent developments and alterations to notions of family, the gestalt of the three types can be of use in the present study, especially due to the fact that many of the individuals in the study sample grew up at a time when alternative family types were not recognized as prolifically in society.

Contemporary views and definitions of the family will now be examined, after a brief cautionary note about the temporal development of "the family". Studies that focus upon the family have to also be aware that this grouping may change over time. For example, a family member may pass away, members may remarry or new members may be added via adoption or pregnancy. For this reason, definitions of family should allow for changes over time and be aware of their impact upon family organization (e.g. AIDS households headed by a child "parent").

4.1.3 Contemporary view and definitions of the family

More contemporarily, that is, with the advent and progression of the twentieth century, the traditional family structure has undergone a number of changes. Some of these changes have been outlined by Ravanera and Rajulton (2000) and include the following:

- an increase in cohabitation with children;
- an increase in the amount of children that leave their home later;

- a change in the household division of labour, with females facing; responsibility as breadwinner and executor of household duties;

- changing family values which have seen cohabitation and divorce becoming more socially acceptable; as well as

- a reduction in the emphasis placed on marriage and an increase in preference for egalitarian spousal relationships and parent-child relationships.

Such changes have necessitated a re-examination and revision of traditional ways of defining the family.

The emergence of post-modernism has also influenced contemporary understanding and definition of the family (Hossfeld, 1991). With its emphasis on multiplicity and pluralism, as well as post-traditionalism, the concept of the family has been made more flexible with regard to the ways in which such a unit is understood and defined (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). Contemporary definitions of the family are more interpretative and tend to refrain from viewing the family as an objectively knowable entity, but rather view it as a complex, contingent lived reality between members (Bernardes, 1997; Morgan, 1996).

Some examples of contemporary definitions of the family include:

- the family as a discursive construction with relationships constituted and maintained through routine dialogue and communication (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990);

- the family as an interactional process as opposed to a structure or set of social ties (Morgan, 1996, 1999); and

- the family as a system of negotiated intimacies (Gillies, 2003).

Family types have also been defined in terms of individualism and collectivism (Corder, 2001). Collectivism refers to a position encompassing co-operation and central planning, as well as a commitment to the values, norms or mores of a system or society (Hofstede, 1994).

Collectivist families are those families in which there is an emphasis on co-operation, resources are pooled, and social commitments (such as attendance at weddings and other family ceremonies) are of great importance (Corder, 2001). In these families, for example, members of the family who are employed would support unemployed members.

Individualism refers to a position encompassing independent thought and action, as well as the predominance of the rights of the individual within the social system. Individualistic families may consequently be understood as those families where loyalty to the family is secondary to the advancement of the individual members (Corder, 2001).

In collectivist families, Corder (2001) has argued that children will be influenced more greatly by others and their actions judged in a social environment where transgression signifies humiliation. In individualistic families, he argues that the independence of children is encouraged and transgression results in guilt. Consequently, persons growing up in these two types of families may develop different attitudes both towards their society and social setting as well as the systems of which they are members. Importantly, families may not fall into either extreme completely, but may position themselves at points along an individualistic/collectivist continuum (Corder, 2001).

4.1.4 Summary of contemporary definitions of the family

Such definitions are both advantageous and disadvantageous. In terms of their advantages, contemporary definitions allow for greater flexibility in terms of membership of the family unit. By avoiding references to household, conjugal relationships, or blood ties, these definitions avoid many of the problems discussed above with respect to the dictionary definitions, by not excluding many alternative family types that have emerged with the post-modern age.

Additionally, these contemporary definitions allow for the psychological perception and interpretation of an individual to play a greater role in defining the family unit of which he is a member. In other words, rather than a top-down prescription which states that the individual's family must consist of his biological parents and siblings or household, regardless of whether the individual himself felt any familial ties to these people, these definitions allow the individual to define his family for himself. This is of particular usefulness in South Africa, where many individuals are raised by individuals other than their biological kin, or distantly related family members, or where households have lost both parents to AIDS and the eldest child takes on the role of head of the household.

However, these definitions are still very broad and do not seem to illuminate clearly enough how (or whether) a family is different from other types of social groupings such as a workplace or sports-team, for example. Minuchin (1974) seems to accept this fact: "the theory of family therapy is predicated on the fact that man is not an isolate. He is an acting and reacting member of social groups" (p.2). Intuitively, it would seem that the family as a social grouping is different to the workplace, however these definitions do not go far enough in drawing distinctions between the different kinds of groups.

Finally, the South African literature was reviewed with respect to current definitions of the family in South Africa. The following definition was obtained from the South African Government's Department of Social Development and will be used to inform the present study (discussed further below).

4.1.5 A South African definition of the family

The South African Government's Department of Social Development (2003) defines the family in the following manner in its *Baseline Document for the Development of a National Policy for Families*:

- "as extended, multi-generational, nuclear or consisting of one or more parents and children, and single parent with children, recombined families with step-parents and step-children, or gay families" (p.24);

- "social units governed by family rules" (p.24);

- "individuals who either by contract and/or agreement, by descent and/or adoption, have psychological/emotional ties with each other and function as a unit within a social and/or economic system, not necessarily living together intimately" (p.24).

The first part of this definition seems to be more about family types, than providing a definition that can be applied to a group to thereby identify such a group as a family. In this way, it excludes family types such as unmarried, cohabiting individuals or families with adopted children. It is advantageous in that it includes many modern, alternative family types such as gay families, but doesn't specify that marriage is necessary.

The second part of the definition makes more progress in terms of providing a more practical, applicable definition. However, it is too broad and could refer to an organised crime syndicate, for example, where none of the members of this group are related to each other in the more traditional sense of family. Additionally, little further information is provided with regard to what constitutes the "family rule".

The third part of the definition appears to be the most useful in terms of capturing what the family signifies and being applicable in terms of identifying such groups in wider society. This definition captures the psychological aspect and subjective perception of family (as

discussed above) by including psychological and emotional ties, as well as allowing the notion of family to extend beyond the household, by including members who may live elsewhere but who are still psychologically or emotionally linked to the family group. The definition also refrains from excluding any alternative family types, by acknowledging that families may emerge as a result of factors other than blood lineage or common genetic material (such as legal unions, or adoption).

A number of definitions for the family have been discussed above, largely with respect to dictionary and contemporary definitions of the family. The author's will now propose a definition of the family that will inform the present study.

4.1.6 Conceptualisation of the family for this study

Given the different ways of understanding the family outlined above, the study will attempt to use a combination of the two main approaches, namely, contemporary and more modern notions. While this study chooses will focus primarily on the immediate blood relatives of the individual concerned, specifically those with whom he has grown up, and secondarily on the extended family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, or significant others who may have performed roles usually associated with nuclear or extended family members, it will also allow for flexibility with respect to alternative family types and changes over time as well as the individual's own definition of what he considers to constitute his family. Hence, a family in this study is defined as:

- the group of individuals biologically related or otherwise, with whom one is involved in intimate, interactional relationship/s over time; and
- whom one subjectively recognizes as playing a significant role in this regard.

Extended family will refer to all those family members, related to the individual concerned, who do not fit into the category above. That is, those individuals to whom the individual is related or with whom that individual has interacted with on a basis that is not as intimate as the above.

This study will also investigate any attempts to begin a family of procreation (inclusive of alternative types such as gay couplings) by the individuals concerned. Prior to examining some of the core aspects of family system's theory, as well as discussing both how a symptom is understood within the family system, the author will shortly discuss the family system's relationship with other systems and the influence of society and culture.

4.2 THE CONTEXT OF THE FAMILY

The family does not exist in isolation, but rather is situated within particular social and cultural contextual settings – the supra-system (Bateson, 1979). Such contexts play an influential role in shaping the way in which a family perceives itself, as well as the form it may take (Connell, 1987). The socio-cultural context, in particular, frequently influences perceptions of what is acceptable with regards to how that family should function in that system (Dallos, 1995; Muncie & Sapsford, 1995). For example, if the socio-cultural context is dominated by conservative values, the traditional nuclear family may be perceived as the norm and as a result, any non-traditional forms, such as single parent or same-sex caregiver families, might be blamed for moral decay, increased crime, unemployment and drug-taking in society.

Muncie and Sapsford (1995) state that families are frequently shock absorbers of change in society. They argue that families absorb socio-cultural changes in various areas such as gender roles, intergenerational relationships, racial attitudes, politics, economics and science,

and as a result, may develop new family forms, relationships or functions. Within a systems framework, one could argue that families with particularly rigid interactions and who cling strongly to stability or homeostasis, might struggle to deal with changes in the socio-cultural milieu. As a result, one might expect these kinds of families to start to exhibit some degree of symptomatic behaviour.

Prior to commencing with the discussion of the theoretical background and conceptual framework that will guide the study, a short cursory discussion on the role of context will be conducted with an aim to illustrate the contextual issues that the author has utilized as part of her guiding frame of reference in the analysis of the data. The main areas discussed are the post-modern family, the role of deviance and the interaction of the family system with larger contextual systems.

4.2.1 The post-modern family

Sociologists such as Shorter (1975), Gergen (1991) and Hossfeld (1991) have detailed influences on the family unit of one such socio-cultural change and its influence on the relationship between family systems and the context in which they are situated: namely, the change from a modern to a post-modern society.

The modern (or post-industrial) family resembles the nuclear family unit and evolved in response to the needs of an industrial society (Parsons, 1956). The modern family exhibited some of the following characteristics:

- it consisted of definite sex role distinctions, with the man or husband as breadwinner and woman or wife as caretaker of the household;
- it acted as a lynch-pin of social cohesion; and

- it functioned as a fundamental building block of order and moral health in society, frequently reflecting the normative views of the particular society.

With the advent of post-modernism, Hossfeld (1991) states that many varieties of other family types (such as single parent families and same sex parent families) were ushered in. Shorter (1975) argues that these emerged out of:

- the economic liberation of women;

- the lack of faith in the previously established order due to the disillusionment in human progress; and,

- the influence of the electronic media, which reflects and legitimates family diversity.

The post-modern family has also become more permeable, specifically with regard to the last point, where the media has brought the global village with its multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives, into the family living room. As a result, the boundaries between the family and other systems are more blurred (Shorter, 1975).

Gergen (1991) has elaborated on this point, labeling the post-modern family as the "saturated family" on account of the degree to which family members are exposed to different views, personalities and relationships. He argues that the post-modern family is more vulnerable to fragmentation and chaos due to this saturation, and that the home, no longer the refuge it symbolized in the modern age, becomes a site of confrontation between different views, ages, genders and ideologies.

Other sociologists such as Denick (1989) and Gillies (2003) adopt a more positive view. Denick (1989) argues that such variation (or saturation) encourages a child growing up in a post-modern family to become more flexible in terms of being able to adapt to different spheres and information, as part of his or her socialization process and individualization or identity formation. Gillies (2003) states that a post-modern family reflects post-traditionalism,

balancing individuality with love and intimacy and economic obligation with an emphasis on relationship together with intimacy and love.

The possible influence of socio-cultural changes on the family, as discussed above, will be an important consideration in the current study. Many of the individuals in the sample, together with their families, lived through a period of considerable social change in South Africa, both in terms of transitions from modern to post-modern trends, as well as the political transformations during, towards and after Apartheid.

Amoateng (1997) in his research on changes in the composition of the South African family from 1994 to 2001, has documented that contemporary South Africa is composed of two main family types, namely, the extended (mostly among African and Coloured racial groups) and nuclear (mostly among White and Asian racial groups) family types. Additionally, he has documented an increase in cohabitation (and lower marriage rates) and female-headed households amongst families in South Africa. Additionally, the African family has traditionally placed considerable importance on descent lineages within the larger kinship network together with the nuclear family (Caldwell, Caldwell, Ankrah, Anarfi, Agyeman, Awusabo-Asare & Orubuloye, 1993). Consequently, the conceptualization of the family for the present study will take the above into account during the analysis and interpretation of the data.

4.2.2 The family and deviance

Another area that has been examined with respect to the relationship between the family and larger context, is that of deviance.

Hoffman (1981) states that deviance serves three purposes for social systems, namely:

- to promote cohesion;

- to keep an outmoded group functioning long after it should have collapsed; and

- to mediate where people are in conflict.

Deviance may occur at the level of the family, where a member who displays deviant behaviour serves to unite the family or keep the family from extinction, and/or at the level of society where a certain type of deviant behaviour may serve to achieve one or all of the aims outlined above by Hoffman (1981) for the society in question. This work is of particular interest in studies such as the present one that focuses on deviant or anti-social behaviour such as serial murder.

4.2.3 The family and larger systems

Finally, families have rules for interaction within larger systems. Involvement with representatives of such systems may be an attempt to fill voids left by cut-off members, divert attention from internal strife, or to support family myths (Imber-Black, 1988). For example, if the eldest sister of a family is the member to whom others go for advice or to talk about their problems, and she leaves, the family may then enlist the help of a psychologist or counselor when future problems arise, if no other member assumes that role within the family system.

The theoretical background of the study, namely family systems theory, will now be outlined, followed by a more detailed description of the conceptual framework that will be derived from family systems theory to guide the analysis and interpretation of the data.

4.3 FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

Family systems theory developed from the application of systemic theory, pioneered by individuals such as Bateson (1979) and Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland (1956) to the family. This took place largely in the 1950's when the psychotherapeutic community working with families began looking for alternatives to the predominant psychoanalytic approaches that dominated practice (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991).

Family systems theory also developed from the considerable body of research that was being done during the 1950's time on the families of schizophrenic individuals, by individuals such as Gregory Bateson and Don Jackson at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration Hospital (Vorster, 2003). Their pioneering paper, together with Jay Haley and John Weakland, titled the "Theory of Schizophrenia", ascribed the source of the thought disorder in the patient to the form of communication exchanged between family members (Bateson *et al.*, 1956). This ushered in a new approach to working with families by applying the new science of cybernetics, or the regulation of self in a social or biological system, to the description of family pathology, and, later on, to devising methods of treatment (Guerin, 1976).

A system can largely be understood as consisting of a number of interconnected elements which mutually and continually influence each other (Dallos, 1995). Given this definition, it is evident how systemic theory could be applied to the family. The family is an organic unit that is made up of interconnected individuals who perform various tasks and fulfill various roles in relation to each other (Muncie & Sapsford, 1995). Consequently, the principles of a system should apply equally to the family, as to other systems. Within a systemic paradigm, the family may be defined as consisting of a number of interrelated members, whose behaviour (together with emotions, actions, thoughts, and beliefs) mutually influences each

other, together with the family as a whole. This view of the family provides pragmatic avenues of change, as well as new ways of understanding pathology and processes in a family, and individual members.

From a systems theoretical point of view, Guttman (1991) sees the family as:

- a cybernetic system (a system of interconnected parts, and as a system that governs itself through feedback);

- a homeostatic system (that is, that negative feedback maintains homeostasis in a system by reducing any deviation that results from the introduction of new information); and

- a rule-governed system (that the mechanisms maintaining homeostasis operate according to certain rules that condition or 'set' the range within which a given behaviour can vary)

This section will now look at aspects of family systems theory. It will first examine some core aspects of family systems theory, as outlined in Watzlawick, Beaven and Jackson (1967) and Bowen (1978), as well as Minuchin (1974) with respect to the structural organization of families, hierarchies within family systems and power. The discussion will then examine the genogram as a means of understanding and conceptualizing family systems, the role of the symptom in families, as well as the family's position within other larger systems and society.

4.3.1 Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's theory of communication and interaction

Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) describe objects of interactional systems as "persons-communicating-with-other-persons" (p. 120). An interactional system consists of 'two or more communicants in the process of, or at the level of, defining the nature of their relationship' (p. 121). They distinguish between two types of systems:

- open systems, and

- closed systems (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967).

Open systems exchange materials and information with the environment, whereas closed systems do not permit the introduction of any novel stimuli from outside of the system. Systems exhibit the following properties:

- wholeness,

- feedback, and

- equifinality (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967).

- **Wholeness.**

The property of wholeness means that every part of a system is related to other parts so that a change in one part results in a change in the total system. Consequently, a system is not summative, but emerges from a combination of elements, and can be viewed as a gestalt of such elements, as opposed to a cumulative, linear aggregation of its various parts. As a result, parts are not unilaterally related, but rather demonstrate circularity with respect to the manner in which they interact. For example, the consequences of A's actions towards B are not limited solely to B, but rather impact on the way that B then reacts to A, and so on.

Applying this principle to family systems, wholeness means that a change in one member of the family, will affect the other members, as well as the family as a unit (Kilpatrick & Holland, 1999). For example, the departure of the eldest son of a family of four, may result in the other sibling having to assume additional responsibilities, and depression over the loss of a child from the household and anxiety over aging in the parents, together with the family having to redefine itself as a unit of three and potentially have to accommodate extension in the form of a new spouse and children from the eldest son who has now moved onto the next phase of his life.

A corollary to the principle of wholeness is circular or cybernetic causality, which will be discussed now.

- **Circular or cybernetic causality**.

Circular causality refers to the fact that, due to the principles of wholeness (where a change in one member of a system impacts upon the behaviour of other members) as well as homeostasis (or keeping levels of system activity within an acceptable range, discussed below), each member's behaviour in a system is maintained by the actions of the other/s. In other words, each person within a family is seen as influencing the other, and their responses, in turn, influence the first person, whose response influences the others, and so on.

Over time, many of these interactions, or circularities (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967), may become more regular and repetitive, giving the impression that they serve as possible rules that are necessary for the functioning of the family (Jackson, 1957). For example, a father may shout at his son on account of his son's behaviour at school, to which the son may react by increasing aggressive behaviour at school as a way of getting back at his father. This then makes the father increase his disciplining of his son, which in turn may result in increased aggressive behaviour at school.

- **Feedback.**

Feedback is related to the principle of homeostasis. It means that part of the output of a system is fed back into that system as an input to modify system activity (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). For example, many of the systems on the human body operate according to feedback mechanisms and monitor if levels of hormones, excretory products, or neurotransmitters are at optimal levels. Feedback also operates in human systems, and especially families, where it serves to regulate processes and interaction within the family unit and between members.

Feedback usually occurs in relation to a system norm or set level (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). The system then decides on how to proceed as a result of how feedback input relates to the system norm, and the type of reaction it wants to achieve, that is, to amplify or reduce deviation from the norm. An example of such a norm in families may be rules around acceptable behaviour, within each individual has to operate. A system tends to calibrate itself around a norm so as to achieve constancy within a defined range. This principle has often been likened to a thermostat, in which there is a lower and higher limit within which the thermostat functions and adjusts itself to achieve the desired norm.

Consequently, there are two types of feedback (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). Positive feedback or escalation (Bateson, 1979; Jackson, 1957) results in an amplification of output deviation from a system norm, whereas negative feedback or stability results in the opposite, namely a reduction of output deviation from a system norm. In a human system, positive feedback usually results in change, whereas negative feedback tends towards stability or homeostasis. In the above example, an individual who deviated from a family norm may be disciplined or sanctioned so that he/she came back into line with the system norm, thus maintaining homeostasis.

This can frequently been seen in the case of families who seek help for a member displaying behavioural problems, and yet appear to frequently jeopardize attempts to bring about change in such a member. Such families and relationships can be seen as particularly rigid closed systems, where change is resisted on account of the threat posed to homeostasis and stability of the family unit (Jackson, 1957).

A system that is constantly threatening to exceed homeostatic limits frequently engages in "runs" (Hoffman, 1981). Normally, when a plateau is exceeded, a deviation-amplifying process sets in and destroys the system. However, less drastic runs frequently delay this process due to the fact that the imbalance in the nuclear family may be trying to correct an

imbalance in the larger kin system or other systems (Hoffman, 1981). As a result, the family pathology is stabilized. Should the stabilizing member leave, or other systems undergo certain changes, this process may break down.

Both stability and escalation are necessary for a family to function as a viable social unit: escalation or an open system, allows for adaptability to novel circumstances while stability allows a family to maintain a certain degree of constancy in the face of such change (Dallos, 1995). Either process, at its extreme, threatens the survival of the family: an overly rigid closed system not being able to adapt to changes, while a highly unstable, open system risking the fragmentation or dissolution of the family unit.

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) were not the only theorists to view the family as a system that tends towards homeostasis. Both Jackson (1957) and Haley (1970) have also advanced this notion in the sense that they claim that the family system attempts to maintain equilibrium (Hoffman, 1981).

- **Reflexivity.**

Reflexivity refers to a system's capacity to monitor and reflect on its own actions. This operates in accordance with feedback. Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) argue that because a system can store and keep a record of previous adaptations and feedback patterns, a pattern of redundancies (although complex) within the system can be recognized and predictability is possible. As a result, family systems can begin to form rules or expectations concerning types of situations or challenges and ways of dealing with them, by grouping together past experiences of similar feedback patterns and responses.

- **Equifinality**.

The property of equifinality means that any alterations in state after a period of time in a system are not determined so much by initial conditions as by the nature of the process and system parameters (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). In other words, the same results in two systems may spring from different origins because of differences in parameters, interactions within the system, and informational exchanges with other systems. In closed systems, where there are no exchanges outside of the system, results may be determined by initial conditions. In open systems however, where this exchange does occur, equifinality is possible, both with respect to the above and its opposite, that is, different results from the same origins. For example, serial murder has often been problematically linked to nature or nurture explanations due to the fact that many individuals who commit serial murder have siblings who do not go on to commit such crimes. However, if serial murder is understood within the context of the family system, it becomes less problematic to understand how this may be possible.

- **Types of interaction**.

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) describe two main types of interaction:

  - symmetrical, and
  - complementary.

In symmetrical interactions, the partners involved mirror each other's behaviour. In this way, each partner attempts to use his/her turn to minimize the extent to which the other partner may be one up on him/her, and thereby minimize any difference between the two. In this way, symmetrical relationships are based on equality but may become quite competitive (in order to prevent either partner from getting too far ahead of the other).

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) have likened symmetrical interactions to a seesaw, where if one partner goes up a bit, the other adjusts to meet the movement. Symmetrical interactions and relationships may escalate into "runaways" where the stability of the relationship is lost and a quarrel or fight takes place. This may also lead to escalation, where the intensity of the behavioural responses increases with each adjustment in each partner.

In complementary interactions, one partner's behaviour complements the other, and the pair are usually arranged in a one-up and one-down position (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). Who occupies which position may vary with each interaction between two partners, however, frequently complementary relationships will have one partner set in the one-up position and the other in the one –down position. For example, in a married couple, there may be one partner who is dominant or assertive, while the other is more submissive or passive.

Conflict may take place when one of the partners (frequently the partner in the one-down position) attempts to take the opposite position. Alternatively, one partner may want to change their position but be prohibited from doing so by a powerful partner or circumstantial factors which may lead to frustration and despair as well as self-estrangement, depression and acting out on the part of the dissatisfied partner.

- **Pathological communication**.

Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) see behavioural, emotional and psychological problems as an outcome of sustained pathological communication between individuals. With the concept "pathological" they mean ways of communication of which the effects and the process of these effects are ineffective. They argue that human beings cannot avoid communicating, for, even by choosing not to communicate with someone, they are, in fact, communicating a certain statement to that someone (namely, "I don't want to communicate with you"). Given this condition, namely the impossibility of not communicating, and if an individual cannot

leave the field in which such interaction takes place, the following options may be available to the person, namely:

- rejecting communication;

- accepting communication;

- disqualifying communication; or

- manifesting a symptom as communication (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967).

Rejecting communication may involve informing the individual directly that one has no desire to communicate with them, for example, by telling them so or leaving the room.

Accepting communication involves responding and starting an interaction with the person concerned, for example, by replying to their statement. Disqualifying communication involves disqualifying the communication of either oneself or the other person, and is frequently found in situations where the individual concerned does not want to communicate but is obligated to do so. Disqualification may be achieved by contradicting oneself, inconsistencies, subject switches, tangentializations, incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, literal interpretations of metaphors or metaphorical interpretations of the literal (as found frequently in people suffering from schizophrenia). Consequently, "crazy" communication may not be exclusively an indicator of mental illness, but rather, may be viewed as an indication of an individual who may be reacting to an absurd or untenable communication context, or both (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967).

Lastly, communicating by means of a symptom involves non-verbally communicating certain information to one's family or others. This differs from intentional feigning of an illness to avoid communicating or interacting with others. Here, when a symptom develops, the individual with the symptom is convinced that he or she is suffering from that particular problem or illness. In this way, the individual avoids the reproach of significant others as well as his or her own guilt. For example, one may become violently ill or suffer an upset stomach

before an important public speech or examination, or start to experience psychotic symptoms such as hearing voices.

The last two aspects of pathological communication are particularly relevant for the current study, in as much as they will be applied to understanding how serial murder may be a means of communicating certain information to the family of individuals who engage in this criminal behaviour. This theory is also useful to examine how communication in general takes place in the families of these individuals and if any common patterns emerge.

Ways of communicating do not only have implications for specific behavioural, emotional or psychological behaviour but also for the way in which an individual defines him/herself in relation to others (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). This will now be discussed with respect to the communication options outlined above, namely with respect to how rejecting, accepting or disqualifying communication, or communicating a symptom, are related to the way one defines oneself.

- **Definitions of self and other**.

When individuals communicate and interact with one another, one person, A, for example, will periodically indicate "This is how I see myself", and the reaction of the other individual, B, will have implications (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). These reactions have been grouped into three types, mainly:

- confirmation;

- rejection; and

- disconfirmation (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967).

If B chooses to confirm A's statement, then communication is generally promoted. If B chooses to reject A's statement, then A may experience the rejection as painful and the relationship may be strained for a while. However, given that B's rejection involves a degree

of recognition of what is being rejected, namely A's self, rejection does not involve a negation of the reality of A.

In contrast with rejection, which involves a negation of A's statement, disconfirmation, involves a negation of the source of the statement, namely, A. For example, A makes a statement indicating, "This is A". Should B disconfirm A's perception of themselves, this may result in A assuming that B does not understand or love them, while B may remain totally oblivious to A's dissatisfaction and assume that A feels understood. This may result in an alienation of A.

Alternatively, B might disconfirm A's self perception but A may not register that his/her message has not gotten through. As a result, a vicious circle ensues in which A may be confused at how their behaviour continually does not achieve the ends that he or she intends. As a result, this individual may be perpetually mystified leading to despair and frustration and a sense that life does not make sense.

As indicated in the examples above, disconfirmation may result in persistent vicious circles, with great potential for pathological behavioural outcomes in the individuals concerned. This has been researched by individuals such as Laing (1961, 1965), who found that such communication is frequently found in families of individuals suffering from schizophrenia. This has been explored largely within the framework of the double bind (Hoffman, 1981; Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). This refers to an instance of pathological communication where an overt demand at one level is covertly nullified or contradicted at another level (Hoffman, 1981).

Individuals caught in such communication patterns frequently have to find ways of communicating that satisfy the paradox, and consequently, appear to make no sense to other individuals outside of the paradox, as in the case of a person suffering from schizophrenia (Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1978). A frequently used example of a

paradoxical communication such as the double bind is the command, "Be spontaneous!" (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). In this case, a person cannot obey the command without contradicting him or herself.

Haley (1970) argues that in a family where double bind communications are used frequently, there is a perpetual struggle for control. As a result, the members use disqualifications of meaning to control the behaviour of the other members and/or to prevent their behaviour from being controlled. Disqualifications may range from pretending one has not understood what another member as said, ignoring another member's communication or changing the subject to taking the literal as metaphoric and vice versa, as is often exhibited by individuals with schizophrenia (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967).

This aspect of Watzlawick *et al.*'s (1967) theory will also be utilized in the study to investigate how definitions of self have been negotiated in the families of individuals who commit serial murder and how this may have impacted upon the behaviour of the individual concerned.

- **Punctuation**.

Punctuation refers to the process whereby people develop a set of self-fulfilling perceptions or beliefs about their relationships that interlock to produce repetitive patterns (Watzlawick *et al*., 1967). This process serves as a means to explain and predict, construct and maintain each other's behaviour, another means by which to ensure the stability of the system.

Punctuation is how we frame our reality. For individuals in a system, it is nearly impossible to place oneself outside the system to observe the full cycle of interaction. Consequently, punctuation is a means by which the individuals attempts to define a cause-effect or beginning and end to his communication, due to the influence of linear thinking.

Once again, utilizing the example of the father and son, the father may perceive his son to be a "rebel without a cause" whereas the son may perceive the father to be pedantic and disciplinarian. On an occasion where the son stays out past his curfew, the father may reprimand him, confirming the son's perception of his father. The son may then react by shouting at his father and protesting against his strong discipline, thereby confirming the father's perception of his son as rebellious. This may then escalate his disciplining behaviour, which would confirm the son's perceptions further.

4.3.2 Summary of Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's view

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) focus upon the nature of communication in the context of an interactional system between two or more people. They demonstrate how the nature of this communication can impact upon the nature of the system as well as individuals who function within such a system.

They classify two types of systems, namely open and closed systems, based on the degree of interaction and exchange systems undertake with other systems or elements. Further, they attribute three properties to open systems, namely, wholeness, feedback and equifinality. Feedback may be positive or negative, and operates in relation to system norms or relationship rules.

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) also discuss various aspects of communication and types of relationships between persons in a system. These include symmetrical and complimentary relationships. In symmetrical relationships, the individuals involved aim to equalize differences between the two of them, whereas complementary relationships involve maximization of difference. As discussed, both of these types may have pathological outcomes when taken to their extremes.

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) also discuss different types of response to situations in which one cannot avoid communicating. These are rejection, acceptance, disqualification and manifestation of a symptom.

Watzlawick *et al*. (1967) additionally address how perceptions of self and other may be negotiated in the context of interactions between two people in a system. These include confirmation, rejection and disconfirmation. Pathological outcomes may result in individuals caught up in vicious circles that are generated by incongruent or problematic communication that takes place about self and other.

4.3.3 Bowen's family theory

Bowen (1978) emphasises the family as an emotional system. He argues that the intense emotional interdependency in families makes interactions in families more predictable than in other groups, and that this interaction crystallizes in particular patterns through time. These patterns may be repeated in subsequent generations. Bowen's family theory (1978) has a number of basic concepts. These are:

- differentiation of self;
- triangles;
- nuclear family emotional system;
- family projection process;
- emotional cut off;
- multigenerational transmission process;
- sibling position; and
- emotional process in society (Hall, 1981).

These will now be dealt with separately.

- **Differentiation of self**.

This refers to the extent to which an individual is embedded in the emotional matrix of the family (Bowen, 1978). An individual that has a better differentiated self, will be able to have a more established notion of self, and make decisions independently of the family matrix of which that person is a member. Less differentiated individuals will be more fused to the identity of the family and depend on the common self of the family unit for direction and beliefs.

Bowen (1978) holds that families generally tend towards fusion. However, the greater flexibility that a particular family has, will enable its members to be sufficiently differentiated. Differentiation, taken to its pathological extreme, will result in isolation or cut-offs, but ideally, should allow for direct meaningful contact with one's family's emotional system but also being sufficiently outside to be objective about one's self and others.

Bowen (1978) also speaks of a *hard-core self* which refers to those parts of one's self that are non-negotiable with others or one's firmest held convictions and beliefs; as well as a *pseudo-self*, which refers to opinions of others that are absorbed as one's own despite having no personal commitment to the beliefs underlying these opinions. With increased differentiation, more use is made of one's hard-core self.

- **Triangles.**

To discuss this aspect of Bowen's theory, Ackerman (1984) will be made use of to supplement Bowen's theoretical discussion. The family as a system can be distinguished by its parts together with their relationships, and behaves as a whole, not as an aggregate (Ackerman, 1984). These relationships between members are often easier to understand when broken up into groups of threes, or triads. Depending on the number of members in the

family, there may be any number of these triads in operation at any one time. For example, in a family of three, there will be one triad; in a family of four, there may be up to four triads at any one time; and in a family of five, up to nine triads.

The relationship of any two entities in a triad, is largely conditional upon the state of the third, with the sum of the quantity of interaction of the three relationships that comprise a triad, remaining constant. For example, if A, B and C are members of a triad, if A increases interaction with B and C, then the interaction between B and C will decrease.

In a balanced triad, all three members have the same amount of interaction and take responsibility for their actions in the context of the relationship (Ackerman, 1984). Additionally, in a balanced triad, relationships between all three members are positive, or at times, there may be one positive relationship or coalition between two members who are both in conflict with a third (Hoffman, 1981).

An unbalanced triad occurs when all three relationships are negative or when there is one negative relationship, or conflict between two members, and two positive relationships, that is between each of the two who are in conflict, and a third member (Hoffman, 1981).

Balance or homeostasis does not necessarily imply harmony or health, but refers rather to the leveling out of positive and negative relationships in the triad (Hoffman, 1981). Additionally, as long as triads are relatively flexible they may stand a better chance of resisting pathological outcomes. As soon as triads are rigid with respect to the organization of their members and the coalitions within them, they are more likely to become pathological (Hoffman, 1981).

This can be illustrated by means of an example of a person suffering from schizophrenia. Such an individual is frequently situated within a closed, rigid family system where interactions are limited in number and set in quality (Selvini-Palazzoli *et al*., 1978). Additionally, in line with the "double bind" theory of schizophrenia (Bateson *et al*., 1956;

Searles, 1959; Sluzki & Veron, 1971), the person suffering from schizophrenia is usually the subject of a paradox, where communication at a digital or verbal level is negated at an analogue or non-verbal level.

This double bind is usually the result of a "game" that is being played out between the parents of the person suffering from schizophrenia, in which both partners covertly vie for control over the spousal relationship (Haley, 1959; Selvini-Palazzoli *et al*., 1978). This is undertaken covertly as a result of the family system not being able to tolerate the breakdown of the spousal relationship, the loss of a spouse or change in general due to its closed and rigid nature as a system. Due to the contradictory messages received by the person suffering from schizophrenia, this person then attempts to behave in a manner that disobeys neither level of the message, resulting in the symptomatic behaviour associated with schizophrenia, and thus maintaining homeostasis in the closed system.

Processes within a triad may include progressive segregation, centralization, and triangulation (Ackerman, 1984). Progressive segregation refers to the process whereby parts that are interdependent differentiate so as to become more independent of one another (Ackerman, 1984). For example, in a family, as children grow older, they may find work and become less dependent on their parents for financial support. Consequently, the family may still be interdependent for emotional support, but more independent with respect to material provision.

Taken to its extreme form, progressive segregation may result in insulation. In a triad, this may be the result of one member being distanced/distancing to the point of being cut off, thereby losing relatedness to the other two members and becoming autonomous. Signs of insulation may include withdrawal and inability to relate to others on the part of the insulated member, as well as attempts by any of the other members to act in anticipation of, or to prevent, the response of the insulated member to any other person (Ackerman, 1984).

Centralization refers to the process whereby functions are assigned in a hierarchical manner so that the system becomes unified and efficient, and small changes in the large or dominant parts may result in larger changes in other parts (Ackerman, 1984). For example, in a family, the primary breadwinner (father or mother) may be assigned the function of providing for the family, with supplementary support from any other members who may be earning money.

Just as insulation would be the extreme end-point of progressive segregation, fusion is the extreme outcome of centralization. Fusion, within a triad, results in one member engulfing or overwhelming another member, with personal boundaries being blurred (Ackerman, 1984). A fused relationship between two members will frequently result in the exclusion of the other member (as well as many other outsiders) and is often based on a need in one member to aggrandize himself at the expense of the other. As a result, a fused relationship results in two members behaving almost as a single individual with one behaving exclusively for the other.

In systems, such as the family, both centralization and segregation are necessary for successful integration of members and efficient and effective functioning. It is important for a family to be united in common goals, and yet for members to be sufficiently differentiated in order to effectively achieve such goals, by performing diverse functions. Loss of differentiation results in a closed system and fusion, whereas loss of centralization results in fragmentation and isolation. Within triads also, fusion and insulation accompany each other, so that in cases where two members are fused, the third member will be insulated, and so forth.

It is important to remember that fusion and insulation, while properties of the system, or triad, are not properties of the individual concerned. For example, an insulated member within a family may be very involved in his/her community. In fact, individuals who insulate

themselves from their family of origin, frequently try to make a whole family out of another individual (Ackerman, 1984).

Triangulation (Haley, 1976; Minuchin, 1974) refers to the process in a triad where one individual stands in relation to two other in such a way as to be the focus of the relationship. The two latter members generally relate only by communicating about the third party and thus avoid direct, personal exchanges, which may result in open conflict as a result (Ackerman, 1984). For example, a mother and father may attempt to avoid relating to one another by becoming overly involved with a child. Triangulation can be observed every time a member of a family speaks on behalf of another, or about one member to another, or is involved in the middle of a conflict between two other members.

Bowen (1978) viewed triangulation as the basic building block of an emotional system, operating as safety valve for when emotional tension in a two-person system exceeded a certain level. In a two-person relationship, the tendencies of progressive segregation and centralization frequently result in power struggles, where greater interaction usually implies that increased centralization with one partner increasingly burdened, and the other humiliated while decreased interaction may result in the loss of the relationship. Consequently, the solution to this dilemma frequently involves the addition of a third member, or development of a triad, where distancing and closure of the dyad is prevented.

Frequently, however, such triads develop into triangulation patterns with barricading or incomplete personal communication between two members, and pseudo-responsibility (see below) with respect to the third party. An example of this process may be evident in a marriage when the decision to have a child is made to prevent the collapse of the dyadic relationship. The married couple can then avoid directly confronting each other about issues and concern themselves with the child. Ackerman (1984) argues that whereas fusion or

insulation often signals the demise of a family, triangulation is a means whereby to keep the system going, albeit not necessarily by "healthy" means.

Ackerman (1984) has identified three patterns of triangulation, namely:

- focused triangulation;
- triangulation with an intermediary; and
- shifting triangles.

Focused triangulation occurs when the third member is ignored as an independent member of the triad, and responsibility for that member is taken by the remaining two, such as in the example above.

Triangulation with an intermediary occurs when the third member is utilized as a go-between for the other two members. For example, parents communicate via a child in the case of a separation or divorce proceedings. Scapegoating is also an example of this type of triangulation, and involves one member being labeled as the "black sheep" of the family and consequently assuming responsibility for al the faults within such a system. This member consequently acts as a means for the other two to avoid self-blame as well as preventing more dangerous warfare between more powerful family members.

Shifting triangles involve intense open conflict, with frequent interruptions, so that different members occupy different positions within a triangulation at different times. For example, two parents triangulate around a child. When forced to confront one another, and their conflict is out in the open, the child may jump to the defence of the mother, and shift the triangle so that she and her father avoid direct conflict, and triangulate around the mother, and so forth.

Triangulation also involves the processes of pseudo-responsibility and barricading. Pseudo-responsibility refers the process whereby a member appears to take responsibility for another, but is actually using the other member for his or her own requirements, such as either

avoiding conflict with another member (such as in focused triangulation). The third member of a triangulated relationship is always in a pseudo-responsible relationship to the other two. An extreme for of pseudo-responsibility is fusion, where one member takes complete responsibility for the other.

Barricading refers to when communications between two members are not complete. This is usually the case between the two members of the triangulated triad who assume pseudoresponsibility with regard to the third member.

A consequence of triangles is a tendency to repeat behaviour patterns automatically, especially in stressful situations. For example, if a mother involves her mother in a triangle when experiencing tension with her child, this pattern will be repeated each time a stressful situation with the child occurs. Additionally, triangles may be multigenerational, both in their spread across the family system (that is, a triangle may involve members from different generations), and in the sense that triangling patterns can be passed on from on generation to the next. For example, if a parent was allied with his same sexed parent, against the parent of the opposite sex, this pattern may be repeated with his children in the subsequent generation.

Although many theorists have conceptualized types of triangles, this discussion will focus on the classifications as proposed by Minuchin (1974). Minuchin conceptualized four types of rigid triads that could lead to pathology, namely:

- triangulation;
- parent-child coalition;
- detouring-attacking; and
- detouring-supportive.

Triangulation has been discussed above and refers to a situation, for example, where two parents in overt conflict try to get the child's support against the other. A parent-child coalition triad refers to a triad where a coalition already is in place between one parent and a

child, and both are in conflict with the other parent. A detouring-attacking triad involves a coalition between the two parents who then scapegoat the child. The conflict with the child frequently serves as a means to keep the parents united, and usually manifests behavioural problems as symptoms.

In a similar vein, a detouring-supportive triad also serves to keep parents together by focusing on the child. However, in this instance, all relationships are positive as the parents focus on the child as an object of concern or to be protected. In this triad, the child will often manifest psychosomatic symptoms. For example, a detouring-attacking triad would have the parents uniting to discipline the child, whereas a detouring-supportive triad would have the parents uniting to look after a sick child. In both triads, the parents are avoiding dealing with the real issues in their relationship (which may result in open conflict) by focusing on the child, or detour.

- **Nuclear family emotional system.**

This refers to the inner core family processes as opposed to multigenerational processes (Hall, 1981). Going back to differentiation, the level of differentiation of the spouses generally determines the family level of differentiation. As will be discussed later, differentiation level tends to be perpetuated across generations due to the fact that an individual usually chooses a spouse having a similar level of differentiation. The lower the level of differentiation in a family, the more fused such a family will be, and as a result, this type of family will exhibit a greater degree of reactivity and tight interdependence between members, which restricts behavioural options.

Generally, an overload of anxiety between spouses is dealt with via

- marital conflict;
- dysfunction of a spouse; or

- projection to a child/children (Hall, 1981).

Symptoms normally develop in a family member when only one strategy is used. Marital conflict is usually the result of excessive fusion, where neither spouse will give in (Bowen, 1978). Dysfunction of a spouse usually occurs where there is a great degree of fusion and one spouse sacrifices their pseudo-self to the other, who then assumes a higher functioning level (Hall, 1981). Consequently, the couple operates in accordance with one common self, largely dictated by one of the spouses.

The adaptive spouse, who has given up their pseudo-self, generally will start to develop symptomatic behaviour such as physical or emotional illness, social acting out (such as alcohol abuse and promiscuity), as a result of having to bear the full load of anxiety of undifferentiation on their own. The dominant spouse is usually unaware of the problems of the adaptive spouse. The dysfunction, however, serves to absorb the undifferentiation or anxiety present in the couple. Consequently, the dysfunction is perpetuated, the other spouse gains strength, and marital conflict or projection to the children, is prevented. Projection to the child or children will be dealt with in the following section.

- **Family projection process**.

Family projection is a means for dealing with surplus undifferentiation in the nuclear family system (Hall, 1981). The level of differentiation of each spouse will influence the degree of fusion in his or her relationship (as discussed above). Should such fusion within the spousal relationship be inadequate to deal with the amount of undifferentiation present, then this residual undifferentiation will remain in the family system, and is usually projected onto a child or children, who absorb this. Family projection is usually accompanied by some marital conflict and dysfunction of a spouse. For example, in a relationship between a mother and child, a mother may reduce her own anxiety levels by projecting it onto the child, and seeing

the child as a problem or needing help or protection. The reader is reminded that Bowen's interpretation and use of the term "projection" does not correspond to psychodynamic conceptualizations and use of the same term. Rather, Bowen's projection signifies a manner in which the system attempts to distribute anxiety and intense emotional processes that may arise from enmeshed relationships along other avenues as a means of preserving homeostasis.

Factors influencing the selection of a child include the sibling position of the parents and the intensity of the parents' dependency on their own parents (that is, the level of differentiation of the parents). The child most trapped is the one who is the most emotionally attached to their parents (Bowen, 1978). This may be manifested as overt closeness or intense repulsion. Popular choices for children include children in the oldest, youngest or only child positions.

- **Emotional cut-off**.

Emotional cut-off is a means of dealing with intense fusion in the family system and signifies an attempt to achieve independence or prevent an annihilation of the self (Bowen, 1978). However, cut-offs generally do not result in greater differentiation but rather result in a gain in pseudo-self and a greater degree of fusion in other relationships.

A precondition for emotional cut-offs is a high level of anxiety in the self or family system (Hall, 1981). Triangles may result in emotional cut-offs where a distanced third person loses contact with the other two. The duration of the emotional cut-off is an indication of the investment of feelings each party has in continuing the distancing. Extreme forms of emotional cut-offs include psychotic symptoms, where the individual suffering these symptoms cuts him/herself off emotionally from the family system and invests these emotions 'outside' of the system, in fantasy (Selvini-Palazzoli *et al.*, 1978) as well as the most extreme form of emotional cut-off, namely, death (premature, suicide or from symptoms).

Emotional cut-offs may be multi-generational (Hall, 1981). When emotional cut-offs exist between parents and grandparents, children are more likely to be cut-off in their relationships as an interpersonal strategy (Haley, 1970).

- **Multigenerational transmission process and sibling position**.

As mentioned above, levels of differentiation, triangles, and emotional cut-offs patterns of behaviour may be transmitted between members of different generations of the same family (Bowen, 1978). Sibling position in a family system tends to influence vulnerability to projection and multigenerational transmission processes (Hall, 1981; Tolman, 1951). As mentioned, oldest, youngest and only children tend to be targets for projection. These positions do not necessarily have to be the chronological positions, but rather the functioning sibling positions. For example, the object of projection is often treated as the youngest, and the child concerned will behave accordingly, or in families where there are large gaps between siblings, the siblings may function as only children.

- **Emotional process in society**.

Bowen (1978) does not exclude the impact of social influence on family processes. In society, he argues that emotional processes move either towards extinction or towards adaptation. If togetherness in society predominates, then differentiation is impeded, and a society tends to stagnate, like a closed system. A society which is largely fused, and characterized by high anxiety levels will manifest "symptoms" such as high crime rates, violence and high rates of divorce, for example (Bowen, 1978).

When differentiation predominates, society generally improves and develops constructively, similar to an open system (Bowen, 1978). The level of anxiety in society (as with the family) generally determines the degree of differentiation in society, which in turn

influences family units (Bowen, 1978). In other words, the process is cyclic in nature. The greater the amount of anxiety in society, the greater the degree of togetherness or fusion, the greater the degree of problem behaviour, which results in societal regression and, over time, societal extinction. Well-differentiated and flexible families are better suited to withstand external impairment influences in society, while fused and brittle families may collapse or explode in response to additional stress from outside (Hall, 1981).

4.3.4 Summary of Bowen's family theory

Bowen (1978) views families as complex emotional systems with patterns of behaviour that are repeated and consequently, predictable. These repetitive patterns are particularly evident during times of stress.

The self emerges out of family interaction. The family tends towards fusion and a common self. Families may take a number of possible positions along a continuum of flexibility and rigidity. Flexible families respond better to stress and allow for greater differentiation of self in their members. Rigid families tend more towards fusion and do not respond as well to stress. The more fused a family is, the higher the level of anxiety within such a system.

Bowen's theory enables one to see how individual functioning and self-determination is a product of family processes, and one's emotional relationship with the family system. It also shows how behaviour may also be influenced by patterns that have been transmitted across generations, as well as in response to emotional processes in society.

4.3.5 The symptom in the family system

Within a systemic paradigm, a problem would be defined as any process that threatens the stability of the system. A system consequently develops its own solutions (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman & Penn, 1987). For example, a family may be growing apart, so, in order to unite the members, the system may produce a solution in the form of a family member who develops a symptom. As a result, the family members will rally around and unite in the cause of the affected member. Further, on examining the history of the afore-mentioned problem or symptom, one might see that it often appears during crisis moments in family life; thus, the problem or symptom helps to restore stability. Symptomatic behaviour consequently may balance or unbalance the system, and not necessarily, by definition, signify pathology for the family concerned (Hoffman, 1981).

Consequently, within family systems theory, pathology in an individual member is secondary to what the presence of such pathology signifies for the system, that is the family, and the function it performs within such a system.

Minuchin (1974) argues that a symptom in a child, frequently indicates the presence or absence of stress in parents. He states that the executive dyad of the nuclear family (which is frequently the parents) may undergo a change or crisis, which exceeds the couple's usual coping mechanisms, and involve the child as a result. The child may then manifest symptomatic behaviour, and if the child is overwhelmed, the involvement may move onto another level, such as other members of the nuclear family, the extended family, or other systems in wider society.

In the case of a child whose problems keep the parents together, the marriage often seems uneven, with one partner appearing to have more power than the other, that is in a complimentary relationship. The couples may also be intensely clinging, intensely avoiding

conflict and/or have children who are disturbed. The child's behaviour influences the balance of power between parents, so that his behaviour may provoke the more powerful or one-up partner, but will be such that only the one-down partner is able to deal with it.

As a result, this couple functions according to what has been termed a "homeostatic see-saw" (Hoffman, 1981, p. 132). If the seesaw is too uneven, the parent/child may develop a symptom; if the seesaw is too even, the couple may split; and if the child's symptom disappears (Hoffman, 1981), a symptom may develop in another part of the system, such as with one of the parents or another child. With such a lot "invested" in a symptom, the system may resist any attempts to "cure" the symptom.

4.3.6 The individual in a family systems approach

It would appear that individual and systemic psychologies have generally been perceived as mutually exclusive. However, many theorists (Haley, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) have challenged this on the basis that a family system can be reflected in the psychology of the individual and vice versa, due to the circular nature of the impact that these two units of understanding have upon one another. Haley (1978) argues that "the smallest unit [of the family system] could be considered to be the individual" (p. 147). Kerr and Bowen (1988) challenge traditional notions of the psychology of the individual by advocating the placement of such a psychology within the larger systemic context of the family system. Consequently, an individual (although representing only one unit within the family system) can be understood as part of a network of interlinking relationships between members of a family system. It follows that the role that such an individual has performed within such a system and the relationships of which he has been a part will impact upon his psychology and that it

is possible to understand an individual by understanding the family system of which he is a part.

In discussing the place of the individual in a systemic point of view, Nardone and Watzlawick (1993) state that if you observe the behaviour of individuals from the systemic and cybernetic point of view, personal entities can be viewed as "not standing on their own and having their own 'determined' evolutive and behavioural scheme, but…interacting inside a system of relationships or a context characterized by a continuous and mutual exchange of information between single entities that influence one another" (p. 36). Similarly, McClendon and Kadis (1990) stress an important point. They base their assumption (from Miller, 1969) on their view of general systems theory (GST). Although every unit is made up of smaller units and the larger unit is more than the sum of its parts, the application of GST seems to focus entirely on the larger unit with the assumption that significant change in the family unit will necessarily result in change in the individual. They believe while this may be so, it misses an important point:

> The family is made up of individuals and each person brings his or her own personal history to the party, perceives and interprets events in the context of his or her own personal history, makes decisions about him/herself and the world, and finally acts on the basis of this personalized processing (p. 137).

The authors quote several studies confirming their point: "that it may not be enough to focus on the system without attending to the individuals who compromise the system" (p. 137).

Following from the above, Kerr and Bowen (1988) state that the evaluation and treatment of families in systemically-oriented psychotherapy can involve any number of members, as

long as the therapist approaches the conceptualization, evaluation and treatment of the issues at hand from a systems perspective (i.e., he or she punctuates the issue hand in a systemic manner). Methods of evaluation include interviews with family members (Kerr & Bowen, 1978) and genograms (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). With regards to the latter, McGoldrick and Gerson specify that although interviews with clients and different members of the family may increase the reliability of information obtained, such a scenario is not always feasible and the interview can then be used with one member (usually the client). In such a case, Guttman (1991) points out that information obtained is as useful, and can be analysed by client and therapist to elicit adaptive and maladaptive patterns across generations. Beyers (personal communication, 2006) points to the caution with which an individual perspective in family psychotherapy and research should be approached but also argues that to exclude individual perspectives when additional family members are unavailable is to undermine the utility and value of an individual's perceptions, beliefs and knowledge of his own family and to diminish the scope of family and social research. The responsibility lies with the researcher in terms of carefully listening with openness to the individual's story about his family system, weighing and evaluating the manner of communication and personal involvement; of how the individual recalls his history; how the interactions between family members are described and communicated; and be aware of his own role in the process of research.

4.4 KEY FAMILY SYSTEM CONCEPTS FOR THIS STUDY

Prior discussion has included an elaboration on the definition of the family that will be used in this study as well as an overview of family systemic theory. Whereas the former will be utilized as a means by which to select the unit of analysis for this particular study (that is, the family system), the latter will be used to interpret the findings of the analysis. In terms of

achieving the latter, it is necessary to narrow down family systems theory to those theoretical elements that the researcher feels are of particular importance in understanding and interpreting family systems. These are:

- emotional processes;

- multigenerational patterns of structure and function; and

- patterns of relationship.

In line with the spirit of reflexivity that characterizes qualitative research, other researchers may have chosen to focus on other aspects of family systems theory, which would have influenced the results of the study in turn. Perhaps this may provide inspiration for future research where other aspects could be used and the results compared. This will be discussed further in chapter 6 however and the different elements selected for this study will now be elaborated upon further.

4.4.1 Emotional processes

Emotional processes form a significant component of family systems, specifically in terms of the manner in which members that are part of such a system encounter emotional processes as part of their relationships with other members, and ways of dealing with such emotional content and process are established at both individual and systemic level.

Emotional processes in the context of serial murder appear to have been dealt with in two predominant ways. On the one hand, serial murder has been portrayed as an act involving aggressive and violent emotional processes (Douglas & Olshaker, 2000; Holmes & De Burger, 1988; Ressler, 1997); while on the other, individuals who commit serial murder have frequently been portrayed as unemotional or detached from the affective component of their acts (Holmes & Holmes, 1996; Meloy, 2000). In this way, the author intends to investigate

the manner in which emotional processes have been negotiated within the family system of an individual who commits serial murder in order to make further sense of the above. This is also imported by the notion of the family as a homeostatic and cybernetic system (Guttman, 1991). Emotional processes interconnect the parts of the system; it also governs the system through feedback. Furthermore, emotional reactions (or not) within the family maintain homeostasis and reduce any deviation that results from the introduction of new information making it difficult to introduce "new" or other emotions into the system.

In terms of emotional processes, Bowen's concept of differentiation as well as his discussion of the role that anxiety and stress play in the family system will be used. It will be of particular interest to see the manner in which the spousal sub-system of family systems deals with anxiety, specifically the impact that this has on the marital relationship, dysfunctions or symptoms in spouses or involvement/projection onto the child subsystem.

An examination of this aspect of family systems becomes important when one considers proposed classifications of individuals who commit serial murder that have been based on an individual's ability to manage their emotions. For example, in terms of Eysenck and Eysenck (1977) who proposed classifying criminals into extroverts or thrill-seekers who actively seek out emotional stimulation, and introverts with little overt emotional expression or affectivity. Additionally, Hickey (2006) has also included suggestions in his work on serial murder that this type of criminal behaviour may result from an inability to control and manage internal emotion states such as anger, hurt, fear and anxiety which results in the externalization of these feelings onto outsiders.

Additionally, individuals such as Leyton (2001) have argued that serial murder frequently represents an attempt on the part of the individual who commits serial murder to assert himself and to be recognized as an important and distinct individual in society. By using Bowen's concept of differentiation together with Ackerman's (1984) concepts of fusion and

isolation, this study may illuminate interesting developments with regard to the manner and extent to which individuals who commit serial murder are a part of their family system.

4.4.2 Multigenerational patterns

The author has also chosen to focus on multigenerational patterns with regards to the family systems of individuals who commit serial murder mainly due to the large role attributed to multigenerational patterns by theorists such as Bowen (1978) and Minuchin (1974) in the perpetuation and escalation of faulty coping strategies and problem solving attempts within a family system. In this way, across generations the family system may develop ways of preserving homeostasis that ultimately may compromise the ability of certain individual members to function optimally. Consequently, the author intends to investigate the role of serial murder behaviour in an individual member within a family system may represent repetition of relationship and other patterns from previous generations, which may serve as a means to maintain homeostasis or perform other system functions.

In terms of Bowen, it will be of interest to see how levels of differentiation are transmitted through the extended family system as well as how stress and anxiety have been managed across generations. The effects of projection across generations will also be examined together with an investigation of repeated patterns of emotional processes in the family system and their impact on the system.

Sibling position and its effect on the family system (especially where sibling constellations are repeated in some manner) will be included in an investigation on multigenerational patterns also. Given that serial murder has frequently been linked to physical, sexual and other types of abuse during the early developmental period by individuals such as Cleary and Luxenburg (1993), and Hazelwood and Warren (1989), it will

be interesting to see what forms an inability to deal with stress and anxiety at other levels of the family system have taken; whether some of these forms include abuse; and whether some of these incidences reflect patterns that have been repeated in other parts and levels of the system.

Minuchin (1974) will lend a more structural interpretation to examination of multigenerational patterns. In this way, the study will examine the manner in which the family system is divided into sub systems, as well as the manner in which these subsystems interact and organize themselves with regards to membership rules and the way in which individual members adopt certain roles within different subsystems. The way in which boundaries are structured around family systems and subsystems will also be of interest with respect to the degree of flexibility or rigidity which characterizes these boundaries, and thereby mediates intra- and inter-system interaction (that is, how much do subsystems interact with each other, and how much does the family interact with outsiders).

As discussed in the literature review (see chapter 3), serial murder has been argued as being the result of the isolation of the individual member who commits serial murder, as well as the entire family system, from other systems or individuals (Hickey, 2006; Ressler *et al*., 1988). In this way, it will be interesting to examine the extent to which rules and boundaries of sub-systems and the entire family system have influenced interaction between systems and consequently, the behaviour of individual members or sub-systems.

4.4.3 Relationship patterns

Serial murder involves an event between people, who usually do not know one another, and yet become connected by virtue of the criminal act that transpires between them. Individuals who commit murder have often been thought to have a particular view of

interpersonal relationships and other people, which may necessitate, facilitate or contribute in some way to their serial murder behaviour (Holmes & DeBurger, 1988; Egger, 1990; Labuschagne, 2001; Lane & Gregg, 1992; Pistorius, 1996). Consequently, the author has chosen to focus upon relationship patterns within family systems of individuals who commit serial murder as the final component of her conceptualization of the family system for the current study. In this sense, she intends to examine how relationship patterns within the family system occur as well as the particular relationships within the family system in which the individual who commits serial murder has been involved, and whether some of these patterns are repeated in (or impact upon) the serial murder behaviour of the individual concerned.

Both Ackerman (1984) and Bowen (1978) ascribe the primary importance of the triad as the fundamental unit of relationships in family systems. Consequently, relationships within the family systems of individuals who commit serial murder will be examined with respect to their arrangement into triangles or triads, and the subsequent influence of these arrangements on the organization and functioning of the family system. In order to achieve this, Bowen's concept of triads, together with the more structural or hierarchical view of Minuchin (1974) in terms of his triads will be used in order to tap both the emotional processing implications (via Bowen) as well as the organizational or subsystem and boundary implications (via Minuchin).

Given the role of power that has frequently been mentioned with respect to serial murder (Prentky, Burgess & Carter, 1986; Ressler *et al.*, 1988), the aspects of family systems theory that deal with relationships in terms of hierarchy and power will be of particular interest in terms of interpreting the family systems of such individuals. The approaches used will thus include Watzlawick *et al.*'s (1967) concepts of symmetrical and complementary relationships, as well as Minuchin's (1974) concepts of hierarchy, coalitions and alliances in family systems.

The theoretical conceptualization above (namely, emotional process, multigenerational patterns and relationship patterns) is illustrated in the diagram (Figure 1 below). As can be seen, emotional processes within the nuclear family, as well as in extended family systems and larger external systems impact upon each other, as well as on individual members. Bowen's theory will be used to interpret these processes in the current study.

In addition to emotional processes, there are also multigenerational factors and processes that may impact upon the nuclear family. These can be seen in the arrows going from extended to nuclear family systems. Additionally, these arrows are bi-directional indicating that activity within the nuclear family system will in turn impact upon extended family systems. For example, if an eldest son refuses to follow in the footsteps of his father, this will have repercussions for the relationship of the son's nuclear family with the extended paternal family system. In order to understand this multigenerational activity, Bowen and Minuchin's theory will be used here.

Finally, the relationships between members within family systems as well as between systems can be seen in the diagram. Firstly, there are bi-directional arrows between members of the nuclear family depicting the relationships between these members. These will be interpreted via Watzlawick's theory as well as Bowen, Minuchin and Ackerman's theories of triangulation. Secondly, there are bi-directional arrows between both nuclear and extended family systems and the larger social milieu (as well as other external systems). The extent to which these arrows are able to operate and the predominant direction along which activity will flow (that is, from the family system outwards or from the outside in towards the family system) will vary from one family system to another.

4.5 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

Family definitions have historically focused on the nuclear family and excluded alternative family types such as single parents and same-sex unions, as well as the manner in which families may change over time.

This study has chosen to interpret the concept of family more holistically, in terms of the nuclear and extended family, as well as allowing for variations along alternative lines.

Family systems theory applies the theory of cybernetics to the family, and examines how processes and outcomes within the family context occur in line with the principles of systemic theory. Within such a paradigm, the family can be viewed as consisting of a number of inter-related members, whose actions and behaviour influence the other members in the family as well as the family system as a whole.

The principles and concepts of family systems will be used to interpret the data in the current study and applied to understand the role that serial murder plays in the family system, specifically with reference to a conceptual framework that focuses upon emotional processes, multigenerational and relationship patterns in family systems. These different aspects are not mutually exclusive but rather influence each other in a circular manner.

The following chapter will examine the methodology for the current study, including aspects such as research design, data collection techniques, sampling strategies and methods of data analysis for the current study.

Figure 1.   Diagrammatic Representation of a Family System

LARGER SOCIAL SYSTEM OR OTHER SYSTEMS
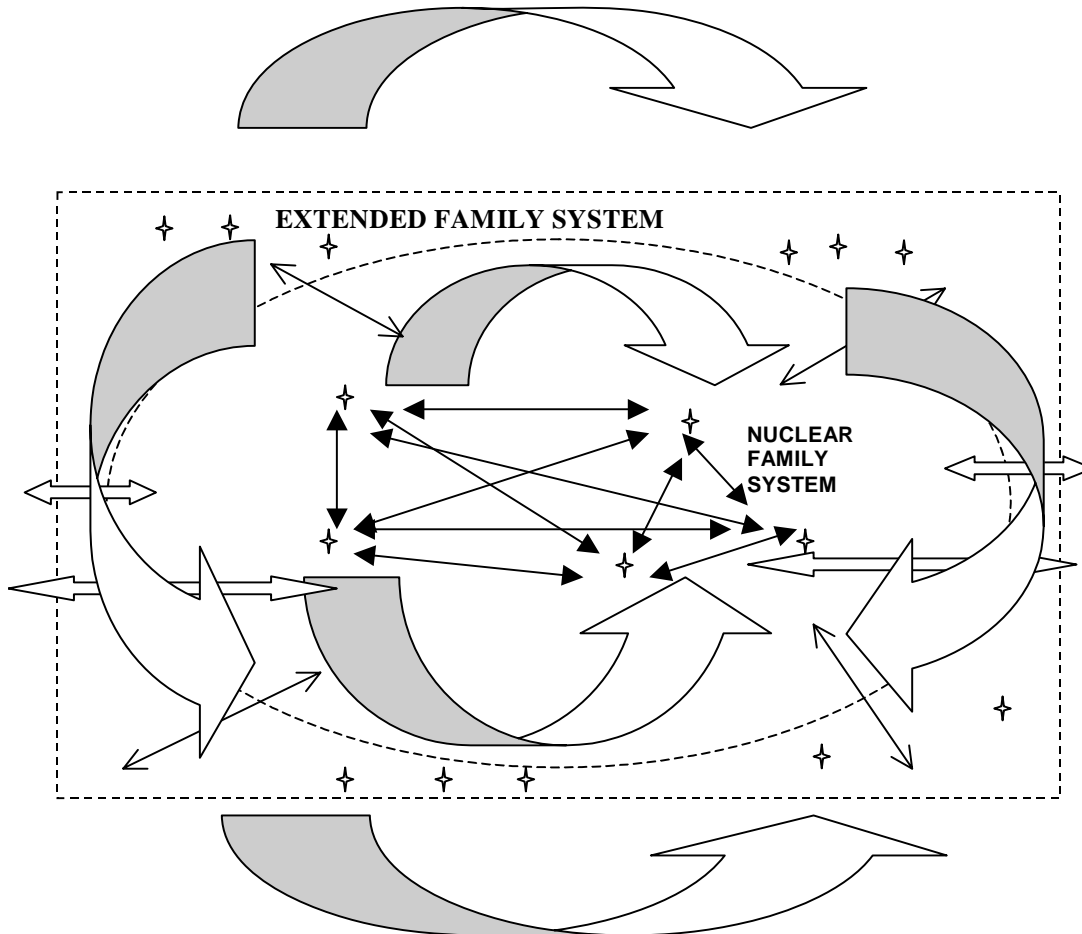
Key to diagram

--- Boundary between systems (in systems with rigid structures)

Relationships (between members)

Relationships between nuclear and extended family systems

Relationships between nuclear/extended family systems and larger systems

Emotional processes

Individual members