

Viewpoint

Getting Tangled in the Web: A Systems Theory Approach to Supervision

Penelope P. Orr and David E. Gussak, Tallahassee, FL

The purpose of art therapy supervision in an educational setting has traditionally been seen as an opportunity to help interns adjust to and learn from their placement sites, understand their clients, develop an understanding of themselves in relation to their work, and translate theory into practice (Dye & Borders, 1990; Hawkins & Shore, 1989; Malchiodi & Riley, 1996). The culmination of supervision is to guide the intern in developing a professional identity and devising successful therapeutic strategies (Malchiodi & Riley, 1996). There are two difficulties with this process: (a) Art therapy interns often come into the field with a narrow notion of where, when, and how art therapy works; and (b) professionals in the field of art therapy are constantly evolving in their answers to these questions. The supervision process must convey the nature of a changing and growing system of art therapy while gradually expanding the intern's comprehension of the field. To communicate the nature of the field of art therapy most effectively to the student, an understanding of the supervision context needs to be clear. Systems theory is a natural framework for understanding these contexts. In this essay, we present the concept of systems theory and discuss how it relates to the field of art therapy—particularly, the issue of developing a professional identity during internship. We then shift from theory to practice and present one program's attempt to overcome the challenges faced by interns in this process.

General Systems Theory

Systems theory is integral to understanding the context of which the art therapist is a part. Generally, this view maintains that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Most systems theorists stress that interaction with other systems in the environment influences an entity's organizational development (Capra, 1996). They also contend that studying the interaction of an individual component with

other systemic components allows one to better understand the whole system (Bertalanffy, 1988; Kelly, 1994; Wiener, 1965); this dynamic can include interactions between two entities or between an entity and its environment. Likewise, to understand the individual components, they must be observed interacting with and within their environments and contexts. The larger environment is continuously influenced by internal and external systems, which in turn influences and changes the responses of these systems. Each component is linked together through a network, and these networks are linked together through their interaction.

Becker (1982) referred to the social organization of the art world as a web made up of interactions among artists, patrons, and viewers. The art therapy field is also defined by its own web of interactions (Gussak, 2001). Understanding this web provides a comprehensive perspective on the complexities an intern faces. Art therapy interns can benefit from a deeper understanding of the part they play in these interactive systems (Luhmann, 1995).

In these interactions within and between systems, there is an input, an output, and a "throughput" (Wyatt, personal communication, October 28, 1999). In biological terms, something is consumed, gets transformed, and then gets expelled. What is consumed, the input, varies, modifying the output. For example, the input (theories of art therapy) might be influenced by the throughput (the contextual system to which the art therapist belongs), and is thus transformed into the output (the practice of the professional). During the throughput, the actions of the networks within the system and how they respond to the input transform what is consumed (Heylighen, 1998). It is by this throughput that interns begin to make the transition from theory into practice—from the academic program to the occupational placements where they will eventually find themselves (Gussak & Orr, 2005).

A system organizes and sustains itself, and its linked internal components form a network of influence. Each system is able to maintain its own boundaries, defined by the processes that occur within. However, each system is linked and influenced by other systems to create new self-influencing networks; these in turn interact with other, larger networks. This phenomenon, called "autopoiesis" by

Editor's note: Penelope P. Orr, PhD, ATR-BC, and David E. Gussak, PhD, ATR-BC, are on the faculty of the graduate art therapy program at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Correspondence concerning this viewpoint may be sent to Dr. Orr via e-mail at porr@mailers.fsu.edu.

Maturana and Varela (1980), becomes a network of processes. Art therapists are frequently linked to each other to form one type of network; they in turn are linked to other healthcare or educational professionals to create larger networks. Each student starts out as an individual system—one characterized by his or her own understanding of art therapy—surrounded by what may appear to be an impermeable boundary. As students enter the larger art therapy system and even larger professional environment, this boundary must open in order for interaction to occur and for these systems to thrive. This is initially difficult for art therapy interns to grasp. They must be introduced gradually to a system to gain a sense of mastery and a sense of place.

Organisms or systems are compelled to evolve, to develop. Achleitner, Vowell, and Wyatt (1998) noted, “From a systems view, structure is emergent and coevolutionary, having some of the following characteristics: self-organizing, self-transcending, self-maintaining” (para. 3). A systems perspective can pave the way for a clearer understanding of the structures and transfer of knowledge. Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979) observed that a new paradigm has emerged for understanding the more complex systems that have been developing in fields from economics to art. The major consequence has been the shift from a single absolute truth to the acceptance of multiple “rights,” explained through many methods. Students may arrive at a single systemic view even if the program in which they learn provides only one or two views of knowledge. In order for art therapy professionals and interns to survive, they will need to understand how they will coevolve with two significant systems: art therapy as a discipline and the larger professional arenas in which they practice.

Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979) accepted the systems notion that “diversity, interaction, and open systems are the nature of things” (p. 12) and that the development and use of knowledge are structured as a complex web. This understanding provides a basis for guiding the beginning art therapy practitioner. The web for the art therapist includes a number of components: (a) political structures that influence national and international healthcare; (b) insurance companies and other healthcare-providing systems; (c) professional organizations; (d) educational and professional standards; (e) the agencies and institutions where the clinician works; (f) other art therapists and healthcare professionals; and (g) art therapy clients. Through their interactions, art therapists both belong to and influence the systems in which they are components (Gussak, 2001). To understand how their interactions have influenced and changed these systems, art therapists need to discern how the field has developed. The theories of the art therapy field and the application of these theories constitute an invisible college of art therapists, that is, a group of like-minded individuals linked together by a range of theoretical beliefs (Gussak, 2000).

Approaches to supervision may be as numerous as the existing educational programs. Regardless of which approach a program employs, understanding systems theory may be a viable first step in determining how programs can better prepare student interns. For example, systems

theory has been used to understand and clarify the Florida State University (FSU) graduate art therapy internship program. The significance of describing this program in this essay is not to present a program that is markedly different from others but rather to provide a working illustration of how systems theory has been used to structure a program more effectively.

From Theory to Practice: The Transition

The FSU program has developed an internship curriculum that maintains the spirit of this theoretical perspective and illustrates how systems theory can provide the scaffold on which to build educational applications. All the students, prior to graduating, are expected to complete 750 practicum hours. Before beginning these hours, students must take a field studies course during the first semester of their graduate student career. The current Chair of the Department of Art Education, Dr. Marcia Rosel, originally designed this course when she was a professor in the University of Louisville’s art therapy program. Offered for one credit, it prepares students to think about the different types of environments where they may end up working.

As part of the field studies course, students are expected to visit at least eight different placement sites by selecting from 12 prearranged site tours. During a typical visit, the students are exposed to the day-to-day workings of a particular site. While on tour and during the question and answer session that follows, the students are expected to interview the site supervisors, using prompts from an established script. Such inquiries address general information about the facility’s philosophy or mission, treatment interventions in use, and the composition of treatment teams. Some of the questions may be more pragmatic, such as the type of background checks required, the type of orientations the interns have to attend, accessibility of client files, and the dress code. Back in class, the students discuss their impressions of the visits. They are then required to write a one-page summary on each of the sites visited, concluding with their perspective on how they would feel about working at the site for an internship. In this manner, students are exposed to how they may influence and how they, in turn, may be influenced by several larger systems.

Many of the students will intern at three different practicum sites before they graduate, one during each remaining semester. Many of the practicum sites for FSU students require a formal interview process. Once at the site, there are several requirements that go beyond providing art therapy services. They will be expected to maintain clinical and educational notes on each of their clients and groups in a format established by their placement. If a student’s placement does not require the student to maintain records, the faculty supervisor will. Students are also required to provide a formal inservice presentation at their internship sites. This is particularly significant for the facilities that do not have an art therapist on staff.

During each practicum, interns meet with an onsite supervisor on a regular basis and with an FSU faculty supervisor each week. During these supervision meetings,

faculty use systems theory to frame discussions about the field of art therapy and internship experiences.

As noted, all components of the internship and supervisory process can be viewed through a systems' lens. The introduction of the art therapy student to potential practicum placements in the field studies class simultaneously introduces the individual system of the student to the larger, more diverse system of the art therapy field. During this class, art therapy students are exposed to a wide range of environments to begin to diffuse their own boundaries so that they may expand their systems' web. This transition in the field studies class is generally nonthreatening to students in that it does not ask them to participate in the larger system but simply to observe, analyze, and consider their own place within it.

In the subsequent practicum classes, the interns gradually shift from observer to practitioner and move from their isolated systems to the larger interacting web. The focus is on evolving and expanding the students' understanding of the field of art therapy and its place in larger systems. By the time the interns are finished with the practicum program, they are exposed to 10 to 12 different professional systems, and they experience how art therapy can fit into a variety of complex networks. By following this process, faculty help students become part of an interacting web that is defined by a combination and adaptation of their previous individual systems and the multifaceted art therapy system—a process of coevolution. Students also gradually learn that there is not one “right” way to practice as an art therapist but multiple ways. Supervising through a web analogy rather than a linear development process helps the students become more flexible and creative in their understanding of art therapy.

Conclusion

Fritjof Capra (1996) indicated that systems thinking relies on the understanding of the “connectedness, relationships [and] context” (p. 29) of its components. An organism, a living network, depends upon “the interactions and relationships among the parts” (p. 29). If dissected, the organism cannot survive. Supervision and practicum experiences are just as delicate. It is not enough that the interns are placed at a site and exposed to interactive systems; students may still maintain a narrow notion of how, where, and when art therapy is effective. If the work of art therapy interns is considered to be separate from the systemic context in which they work and the supervision focus is primarily on the individual and not on the impact of belonging to the larger web, then a valuable supervisory opportunity is overlooked. The practicum supervisor has failed to convey the nature of evolving systems and cannot hope to expand the intern's concept of art therapy. Under these circumstances, the relationship between the intern and the contextual systems cannot thrive.

It is not required that systems theory be adopted as the sole theoretical model for educating art therapy interns. This theory has been used here to underscore the significance of the networks to which interns belong. By using

this theory as a scaffold for understanding the practicum experience, the art therapy supervisor can help an intern untangle intricate systems' webs and create greater opportunities to learn and develop.

References

- Achleitner, H. K., Vowell, F., & Wyatt, R. B. (1998). Global conversations: New horizons for information professionals and students. *First Monday* [Online journal]. Retrieved from www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_1/achleit/index.html
- Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art worlds*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Capra, F. (1996). *The web of life*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Dye, H. A., & Borders, L. D. (1990). Counseling supervisors: Standards for preparation and practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 69*, 27-32.
- Gussak, D. (2000). The invisible college of art therapists. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 17*(1), 4-6.
- Gussak, D. (2001). *The work of the art therapist: An interactionist perspective*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Emporia State University, Emporia, KS.
- Gussak, D., & Orr, P. (2005). Ethical responsibilities: Preparing students for the real art therapy world. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 22*(2), 101-104.
- Hawkins, P., & Shore, R. (1989). *Supervision in the helping professions*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Heylighen, F. (1998). Basic concepts of the systems approach. *Principia Cybernetica Web* [Online journal]. Retrieved from <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/SYSAPPR.html>
- Kelly, K. (1994). *Out of control*. Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley.
- Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Malchiodi, C. A., & Riley, S. (1996). *Supervision and related issues: A handbook for professionals*. Chicago: Magnolia Street.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel.
- Schwartz, P., & Ogilvy, J. (1979). *The emergent paradigm: Changing patterns of thought and belief*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- von Bertalanffy, L. (1988). *General systems theory* (rev. ed.). New York: George Braziller.
- Wiener, N. (1965). *Cybernetics: Or control and communication in the animal and the machine*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.