Family Therapy: Systemic Hypothesis

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What is it?
A circular (vs linear) way to conceptualize a presenting issue (or other pattern) in relation to the context in which it occurs.

Why should I use it?
To assist therapists and families in understanding the ongoing “stuck” patterns, move the family system from a focus on content (issues) to process (patterns), promote ideas about family change, and obtain feedback from supervisor/team related to the change needed to meet therapeutic treatment goals.

When do I use it?
When trying to understand the family system, to gather more information about relational interactions, to create/answer systemic questions related to current issue, to encourage families to change their narrative and create opportunities for positive change.

How does it foster change?
It incorporates each person's reality and perspectives, identifies family themes, includes family-of-origin factors when relevant, includes thoughts and feelings as well as behaviors, allows family members to take risks and experiment with interventions for change, provides opportunity for families to understand their systemic hypothesis as well as take responsibility to change it, is constantly changing with new information, and moves families from first-order to second-order change for true sustainability.

Steps
1) Initial systemic hypothesis = occurs at the initial stages of therapy, usually more content focused, brief circular conceptualization with minimal information
2) Working systemic hypothesis = moving to process stage, includes issues and systemic thinking, target for intervention and change
3) Ideal systemic hypothesis = final goal with evidence of second-order change

Application
Interventions can occur at any step throughout the systemic hypothesis, but the earlier the better. By using circular questioning, the therapist can add more to the process pattern, and foster family buy-in to change. The same content pattern may occur, but with different topic issues (i.e., late for curfew, kid is verbally disrespectful, etc.). The process of the family pattern will remain the same (i.e., youth is not held accountable, lack of co-parenting in the executive subsystem, ineffective communication, negative behavior serves a function of getting parents to interact, etc.). Remember, the therapist may have several systemic hypotheses at a time, and they are temporary, flexible explanations which are open to constant revisions with new relational information and family system change.
Example 1: Simple diagrams

Start:
Mom yells at kid to do his HW

Kid tells mom to back-off, he isn't at school & shouldn't have to do it

Mom walks away, & tells dad to handle it

Dad begs kid to do HW, so mom will stop naggin him

Kid ignores dad, & says HW & mom are stupid. Keeps playing videogame

Start:
Mom yells at kid to do his HW

“Here we go again. I am worried he won’t pass”

“She’s stupid. Can’t she see I’m playing my game?!”

“I’m sick of doing this by myself. Dad should step up & finally parent!”

“Oh man. I’m really in the dog house now. Maybe if I pay him, he’ll do his HW, & mom won’t be mad”

“If I just ignore them long enough, they’ll argue themselves, & forget about me & my HW”
Example 2: Complex written


The following are taken verbatim from the two case examples provided in the above-listed article. They are presented as a complex relational (systemic) hypotheses.

“*The mother and her daughter are transitioning to living together after a series of disruptions in their relationship history. The mother wants her daughter to reassure her that she loves her and will not reject her. When the daughter does not offer reassurance, the mother escalates the behaviors that upset the daughter. The daughter responds by distancing from the mother. The mother’s need for love and reassurance leaves little room for the daughter’s feelings. The daughter feels that she needs to take care of her mother. Burdened by this responsibility, overwhelmed, and unable to articulate her feelings, the daughter erupts in the displays of anger*” (Page 633).

“In *this family, the son’s problematic behavior is informed by his parents’ inability to come together around issues of discipline. Their inability to do so is related to the way the mother felt growing up, in that she believes her brother’s problems persisted because her parents did not set limits on his problematic behavior. The mother is determined to hold her son accountable for his disrespectful behavior because she is trying to prevent her son from repeating her brother’s troubled life trajectory. The father’s experience of maltreatment by his stepfather, combined with the loss of his birth father, causes him to withdraw from conflict because he believes that intervening will be ineffective. He conflates his early experiences in childhood with the current situation. His son, caught in this triangle, escalates as he feels the need to assert his own emerging autonomy and express his jealousy of his younger sister. The therapist observes a pernicious cycle of interaction. The mother feels unsupported by her husband; the father feels that he will be ineffective to influence what he thinks are harsh punishments of his wife; the son sees the confrontation with his mother as his only option*” (Page 637).