“Smith-Acuña illuminates the structural hierarchy, roles, and boundaries that give a system structure. The relationship between parts and wholes is both simple and profound, and particularly important in looking at systems structure. These morsels of wisdom are good examples of Smith-Acuña’s grace as a systems theory tour guide: one moment she’s digging deeper into the nuances among the theories, the next moment she’s simplifying without dumbing down, but in a manner that is enormously liberating. We enjoy the fun, full, and informed journey with her.” —Frank S. Pittman III, MD

A PRACTICAL PRESENTATION OF SYSTEMS THEORY AS A FUNDAMENTAL MODEL FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE

Valuable for seasoned mental health professionals as well as those in training, Systems Theory in Action presents systems theory—the unifying principles surrounding the organization and functioning of systems—as it applies to individual, couples, and family therapy.

This innovative book explores systems theory as an effective model for general mental health practice. It examines the role systems theory can play, specifically in understanding clients’ presenting problems in context, within the various systems and subsystems in which the problems are embedded.

Filled with realistic clinical stories illustrating relevant concepts that tie theory to technique, Systems Theory in Action takes an in-depth look at:

• Systems theory as a solid guide through the dynamic process of psychotherapy

• The multilayered value of observing human interactions through a systems view

• Systemic thinking, its core components, and how it serves to reveal a “big picture” view of clients and their presenting problems

Systems Theory in Action is a unique contribution to the field, translating the technical terminology of general systems thinking into common, everyday language.

SHELLY SMITH-ACUÑA, PhD, is the Director of the Doctoral Program in the Graduate School of Professional Psychology at the University of Denver. She teaches systems theory, family therapy, and couples therapy. In addition, she maintains a successful private practice.
Systems Theory in Action

Applications to Individual, Couples, and Family Therapy
Systems Theory in Action

Applications to Individual, Couples, and Family Therapy

Shelly Smith-Acuña
To my dad, Warren Smith, for teaching me patience, perseverance, and dedication
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I owe a debt of gratitude to the many systems that supported the writing of this book. I am reminded of the concentric circle diagram that appears in Chapter 2, which outlines all the systems that are influential in the life of a child. In a similar fashion, there are many groups of people who have had a direct or indirect influence on this book.

First, my social circles have indulged me by giving me a pass on committee work and hosting events and have provided advice and encouragement. I would like to thank Pam Booth, Megan Fante, Suellen Howard, Cora Neslin, Julie Savoie, Amy Tabor, and Kerri Ziller for cheering me on and Richard Evans and Char Elliot for inspiration that often felt divine.

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Finally, I make the point that systems theory isn’t primarily about families, and yet my family is my primary source of support and motivation. I want to thank my German family for their interest, investment, and acceptance through the years. To my parents, Charlotte and Warren, and my siblings, Suzanne and Wesley, I could not have asked for a warmer, more loving, and more encouraging family life. I am so grateful for all the ways that I can count on you. And on to the inner circle, I am thankful to have found Tony, the love of my life, and to have Monica and Evan, truly the children of my dreams. You are my secure home base and my sanctuary. Thank you for everything!
Preface

Many of the examples in this book come from the classroom, and I wrote the book with students in mind. I have been fortunate in teaching a Systems Theory in Psychology course for doctoral psychology students for 17 years. This course is required of all first-year students as a part of a year-long theory sequence. Unlike programs that teach systems theory as part of family psychology, our program utilizes systems theory as a foundational model for general mental health practice. Because I have struggled to find sources that use systems theory in this broad way, I began to explore the possibility of writing this book. As I mentioned in subsequent chapters, beyond the fascinating but dense early texts on applying systemic principles to social groups, there was little available outside the family therapy field. Further, most of the writing done in family therapy was linked to one of the early theorists. I realized that a general systems text could take a step back from these specific approaches and could supplement one of the overview family therapy textbooks.

Many of the other examples in this book come from my clinical practice, and I also wrote the book for practitioners. The art of psychotherapy is a vital, dynamic process that continually keeps me on my toes, and systems theory has been a worthy guide through the process. As my work evolves and improves, I return to basic systemic concepts for insight and clarity. I believe that sharing clinical stories is a meaningful and interesting endeavor that both provides intellectual satisfaction and enriches the work that we do. I hope that the book will allow clinicians to review basic concepts in a way that invites them to reflect on their experiences.

Most students in the mental health field are learning to be clinicians, and most clinicians are lifelong students, so my dual purposes in writing this book overlap considerably. I have tried to translate the technical language of general systems thinking into common, everyday language. As a translator, I endeavor to retain some of the original
excitement of this comprehensive, far-reaching way of looking at human behavior. At the same time, I hope to capture the practical utility of observing human interactions through a systems lens. I have used many of the foundational texts from general systems theory, family therapy, and couples therapy, and I have also included some of my favorite references from the individual therapy literature. I have tried to weave together these background sources in a way that will present you with the key elements of each source and spark your curiosity to go deeper into each theory. Even without going back to the original sources, however, I hope that you will feel solidly grounded in the core components of systemic thinking.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Systems Thinking

I often begin my course on Systems Theory with a game that has the following directions: “The name of this game gives the rules of the game. It’s called Letters and Patterns, not Words and Concepts.” I then give some of the following examples and ask the class to join in with their own examples.

- It is puppies and kittens, not dogs and cats.
- It is summer and fall, not spring and winter.
- It is cotton and wool, not silk and nylon.
- It is mommy and daddy, not grandma and grandpa.

Generally, at least a few of the students have played the game and chime in with their own examples:

- It is beer, pizza, and cheese, but not wine, bread, and chocolate.
- It is football and soccer, but not skating and snowboarding.

Then I shake it up a bit and give other types of examples: It is bedroom but not jockey; it is broom but not steak. And finally I will try to make it a bit easier:

- It is running, but not run; it is hopping, but not hoping.

At times, a brave student ventures an incorrect guess (“It is swimming but not skiing”; actually, it is both!), but usually students who haven’t figured out the game sit with puzzled expressions until I explain the rules. Seeing the words on the page may have helped you uncover the pattern, and most people have an “aha!” moment.