

A systems view of man-general systems theory

Psychology



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A Systems View of Man-General Systems Theory General Systems Theory

The General Systems theory was developed by Ludwig Von Bertalanffy in 1950. A system in this case refers to a set of interacting or interdependent entities forming an integrated whole. A system is also “ an organized complex whose parts are interrelated regardless of what type of parts they are and how they are interrelated” (Bertalanffy, 1981 p. 2). A system can be closed or open. A closed system is whereby the end result is determined by the initial conditions and does not connect with the environment for information. For example, in a chemical reaction the final concentration is dependent on the concentration of the initial ingredients. An open system on the other hand, is whereby the end can be achieved through various means thus does not depend on initial elements. Information from the environment is incorporated and is essential in shaping the final output. Human beings in this case are viewed as open systems and are organisms (p. 8). The systems theory is based on various assumptions. One of the core assumptions of Bertalanffy is that a system should be understood as a whole; in other words, a system is greater than the sum of its parts. Contrary to other theorists who analyze the world from its parts and relating them to the whole, his theory is not reducible in nature. That is, it depends on interactions of the parts of the system but cannot be broken down into distinct parts. He asserts that all properties of a given system cannot be explained by the sum of its component parts, rather the system as a whole determines how the parts function (p. 5). The system thus gives roles to the subsystem of family or society. This is a concept he referred as holism. The human mind according to this theory is assumed to be “ an integrated pattern of processes that represent dynamics of human self-organization” (p. 11). The mind or mental

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processes determine how living beings function thus it is a very important property of the living systems. Another core assumption of this theory is that organisms or living system is not passive but active. There is a tendency to believe that living beings or humans always respond to stimulus in the environment but do not generate own drive thus emphasis on stimulus-response reactions. However, as Bertalanffy puts it living organisms can advance towards higher order and organization because they are active (9). They have inner drive or motivation that stimulates them towards a desired goal rather than waiting for a stimulus in the environment for energy. Human beings unlike animals therefore, are able to decide their paths or plan ahead using their mind. They relate to their environment by acquiring useful needed to achieve higher goals or to adapt to the dynamic environment. The principle of equifinality is also crucial to the systems theory as it helps to distinguish between closed and open systems. As stated earlier, in a closed system the process is irreversible and the final state is determined by initial conditions. Any alterations in the process change the final outcome completely hence it vanishes or dies. In open systems the final result may be achieved through different ways and by varied initial conditions. The system in this case keeps evolving and properties keep emerging through interaction with the environment. The system is thus self-organizing and openness accounts for stability and change in the system (p 18). According to Bertalanffy, living systems maintain themselves in a steady state and are capable of developing towards states of increased order and organization. This accounts for evolution from primitive states to civilized individuals or from childhood to adulthood. Different people can experience different childhoods but end up being in the same state in life. The theory also

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assumes that there exists a symbolic universe in which man lives (Bertalanffy, 2). Man is thus involved in creating symbols which dominate his life and differentiate him from other organisms such as animals. Values possessed by man are symbolic functions and guide his life. As such human beings are able to consciously plan whatever they want to do. They can also anticipate the future, have a conscience and can discern what is right or wrong. Most of all they have an idea of acceptable values and morality. Symbolic functions are therefore an integral part of the open systems theory. The theory is crucial as it helps to explain psychological behaviors which are deviations from the norm. It also helps us to understand human behavior based on a person's development. According to this theory, mental disturbances are a result of disturbances of symbolic functions and the experiences in early childhood have an impact in later stages of life such as adulthood (p. 7). It also helps to understand the value system of human beings as it impacts on the whole system. The theory is also a good model for viewing the interaction between man and his environment. However, it has been criticized for various reasons. It divides individuals into hierarchies with existence of dominant groups especially in the family system. It is also criticized for assuming that all parts of the system have equal power. It may also not generate much explanatory power. The theory is very useful in clinical psychology to explain human behaviors hence know the right cure or how to deal with the patient. Since most human problems such as psychopathology, and depression are linked to dysfunction of the organism's system it is easier to deal with. The physician should seek to understand the history of the patient to understand the experiences such a person has gone through since early childhood. The stages of development can also help to

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explain what resulted into the dysfunction; it can be a result of delay in mental development. Analyzing the factors in the environment is crucial as they affect development. Reference Von Bertalanffy, L (1981) A Systems View of Man: Collected Essays, edited by Paul A. Lavolette. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.