

Oklahoma Baptist University  
Graduate Studies in Marriage and Family Therapy

Cybernetics and the Tao (道) of Family Therapy

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Dr. Garry Bailey

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By  
Michael D. Wright  
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## Introduction

Eastern and Western thinkers, working with the same basic environmental phenomena, have traditionally generated very different philosophies of understanding and relating to those phenomena. Eastern thought, particularly Far Eastern thought, has its roots in the Chinese culture where two different and complementary paradigms predominantly explain and define life experience: Confucianism (孔夫教) and Taoism (道教). Confucianism was (and still is) a way of relating to the daily rules of human relationship in society (e.g. business, family, social relationships). Confucius and his disciples did not attempt to understand or explain the mystical experience of life, but rather focused on the practicalities of human relationships. Taoism was (and still is) a way of relating to the spiritual, or mystical dimensions of life that seek to, as Capra (2000) states, “transcend the world of society and everyday life and to reach a higher plane of consciousness.” Both Confucianism and Taoism co-evolved through the centuries and have generally, though not always, been viewed as complementary. The Chinese philosopher has long understood that one does not live on only one plain (practical or mystical), but co-exists on both dimensions. This paper will highlight the Taoist world-view as a means of guiding the reader to better understand the Western idea of cybernetics in family therapy theory.

As opposed to Eastern cultures that have traditionally embraced a mystical and circular metaphor of life, the Western world-view has developed a scientific and linear metaphor for understanding life. In the field of psychology and other sciences this is evident in behavioral and linear approaches of cause-and-effect relationships to explain

the human and environmental experience. Western thinkers are, however, beginning to embrace an understanding of a world that is less linear and resembles an Eastern philosophy of life. Western scientists refer to this systemic paradigm as cybernetics. The purpose of this paper is to assert that Taoist ideas and cybernetic ideas are two different perspectives of the same whole that, when viewed together, create a more comprehensible and comprehensive understanding of the cybernetics of family systems.

### **Cybernetics**

Cybernetics grew out of a biological model that recognized self-regulation of interconnected components (ecological systems) through negative and positive feedback processes maintaining a homeostatic state. Cybernetic thought was first championed by Weiner (1961), and then advanced by Bateson (1979), who became the advocate of cybernetics and systemic thinking in the social sciences field as he identified and applied its principles of circular causality.

The main criticism of early cybernetic thought was that it failed to consider the relationship of outside variables on the system; in essence, assuming the system is separate from outside variables. To address this limitation in view, Bateson, Maturana and others have carried cybernetic thought further by recognizing that a system cannot be viewed from the outside by an observer, but that the observer, upon observing a system, enters the system being observed. Keeney (1983) calls this shift in understanding systems *cybernetics of cybernetics*. Recognizing that systems can be viewed in different ways (what Bateson called double description) has led to what Amatea and Sherrard (1994) call “opposing truths.” Amatea and Sherrard state that the opposing truths of cybernetics of cybernetics (or second order cybernetics): “...positions the observer on the inside of

the system observed. As an insider, the observer is inclined toward ecological inquiry, circular description, 'both/and' choices, and 'disciplined subjectivity.'" They go on to identify second order cybernetics in this way: "There is no reference to an outside environment; the boundary around the observing system is unbroken and the system is closed."

Such second order cybernetic reasoning is what has led family system theorists to recognize the members of a family system as co-collaborators in therapy with the therapist as he or she enters into the family system; to view families as having multiple realities of a problem; and to incorporate tools such as circular questioning (Tomm, 1988).

### **Taoism**

Tao, meaning literally, *the way* (or path) recognizes that there is an "ultimate reality which underlies and unifies the multiple things and events we observe"(Capra). In the largest and most verbose of the few Taoist texts, the Chuang-Tzu (trans. Maurer, 1982), it is stated thusly: "There are the three terms—'complete', 'all-embracing, 'the whole'. These names are different, but the reality sought in them is the same: referring to the One thing." This *one thing*, the *Way* or Tao, is the ultimate, indefinable reality of life. Taoism does not attempt to present itself as rational. It began as a mystical philosophy of life (that later integrated with Chinese ancestral worship and Buddhist ideas and became a religion) recognized as *the way* of liberation. It was understood that the Tao was ineffable, and had to be experienced mystically, not rationally, to be grasped. The Tao is to be envisioned as a continuous flow and change that is recognized as the essence of the universe (Hartz, 1993). It is the undertaking of the Chinese mystic (and the systemically

oriented family therapist) to recognize these universally occurring patterns and to organize life according to their example.

Tao recognizes the cyclic nature of life. Undoubtedly, the ancient Chinese observed the patterns of the sun, moon and stars as well as the flows of the tide, the changing of the seasons, and the patterns of life. The Chinese acknowledged a truth that Westerners blinded by scientific reductionism (and socio-political and economic stability) often fail to see: whenever a situation develops to its extreme, whether in nature or in society, it will ultimately and naturally circle into its opposite. This concept is most simply envisioned in the symbol of the yin-yang (陰陽), which depicts a whole that is



made of its opposite. Literally, yin means cold and yang means hot. Wang Chung, in A.D. 80 (Needham, 1956) stated: “The yang having reached its climax retreats in favor of the yin; the yin having reached its climax retreats in favor of the yang.” As either the yin or the yang reaches its extreme, it contains in itself the rudiment of its opposite, allowing it to naturally and spontaneously cycle (self-regulate) forward, (not backward as a pendulum but forward as a circle) toward a balance; what in cybernetics is called homeodynamics or morphostasis.

Two enduring concepts of Taoism, articulated by Lau-tzu (老子 – literally Old Brother), that are briefly mentioned above are intertwined with the yin-yang: wu wei (無為), and the principle of opposing forces of nature. Both are complementary philosophies of change and offer harmonizing perspectives of understanding cybernetics and family systems theory. Wu wei, or *non-action*, suggests that the way to change is not through the inelegance of force, but by refraining from taking action that is out of character with nature (like prescribing the symptom in family therapy). Lau-tzu is quoted in the Tao De Ching (道德經 – scriptures of the virtuous path) (Welch, 1957) as saying: “By non-action everything can be done.” The Chuang-Tzu explains: “Non-action does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent. Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied.” This concept is best exemplified in psychotherapy theories such as Client-centered Therapy, Solution-focused Therapy, and Emotion-focused Therapy. These three approaches to therapy all have concepts similar to wu wei as a guiding principle and can be better understood through the metaphor of wu wei.

The principle of opposites, understood most clearly through the symbolism of the yin-yang, is a concept relatively unfamiliar in the West. It provides a philosophy of change where attaining a thing is reached by beginning with the opposite, just as the Tao of nature reaches an extreme, then naturally cycles forward to its opposite. The Tao De Ching states:

Be bent, and you will remain straight.

Be vacant, and you will remain full.

Be worn, and you will remain new.

Though counter-intuitive for Westerners, such a unique approach is the defining characteristic of Strategic Family Therapy, which is based on the principles of cybernetics.

### **Discussion**

Family therapy, a field that embraces cybernetics, can benefit from a more enhanced view of cybernetics as can be imparted by Taoist ideas. Taoism can provide expression for a more mystical approach to cybernetics in Western family therapy practices that have been traditionally scientifically based. The role of change by the family therapist can be better realized within the family system by employing principles of non-action (not pushing for change, but expecting it), intuitively following the natural patterns of the family (helping them to find their own solutions), and following one's own natural and spontaneous style of therapy (instead of unnaturally imitating another therapist's style). By practicing the principle of open-mindedly observing natural patterns therapists are less likely to make the mistake of becoming wedded to one way of viewing family problems (Selekman, 1997) or over-committing to one technique for solving problems. As Lau-tzu stated, "The more you know, the less you understand." By helping families develop a larger or distanced view of their problem-saturated lives (double description in cybernetic terminology; parts forming a whole in Taoist language) therapists may help families move forward through their problems to the solutions they long for. In contrast to the typical Western, scientific and action-oriented world-view that has traditionally driven the family therapy profession, we can find a sense of balance in the principles of cybernetics as is imaginatively stated in the Tao of Pooh (Hoff, 1982):

When we learn to work with our own Inner Nature, and with the natural laws operating around us, we reach the level of Wu Wei [also called *the Pooh Way*]. Then we work with the natural order of things and operate on the principle of minimal effort. Since the natural world follows that principle, it does not make mistakes. Mistakes are made – or imagined – by man, the creature with the overloaded Brain who separates himself from the supporting network of natural laws by interfering and trying too hard. Not like Pooh, the most effortless Bear we've ever seen.

'Just how do you do it, Pooh?'

'Do what?' Asked Pooh.

'Become so Effortless.'

'I don't *do* much of anything,' he said.

'But all those things of yours get done.'

'They just sort of happen,' he said.

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