

From “Saving Satir” to “Evolving Satir”

Bonnie K. Lee and Martin Rovers

This commentary offers an expanded viewpoint to Christopher J. Wretman’s (2016) article titled “Saving Satir: Contemporary Perspectives on the Change Process Model,” which appeared in the January 2016 issue of *Social Work*. The article observed that Virginia Satir’s work has been underrepresented in the research and academic literature. Its author was concerned that in today’s evidence-based climate, Satir’s work and ideas run the risk of being lost short of empirical validation. Wretman attempted to identify what key constructs belong to Satir and pitched for the systematization of Satir’s model, that is, to subject it to empirical research and thus “save Satir.”

SITUATING SATIR

Satir, a teacher, social worker, and pioneer figure in family therapy (Nichols, 2013), cut out a path that was more in the tradition of social movement leaders (Lee, 2002c) than researchers in the academe. Working in a time of momentous change in the United States in the 1960s to 1980s, when the status quo of women, race, war, environment, and marriage were being questioned (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), she struck a chord with those who lived under oppressive institutions of hierarchical domination. In the spirit of a movement leader, she pursued a strategy of working outside of institutions to reach the masses rather than gain acceptance among the elite (King, 1989). Her penchant for connecting with the grassroots and with families directly is not foreign to social workers, who can be seen as forerunners to the profession of marriage and family therapy (Bond, 2009). Through workshops and staged family reconstructions, Satir challenged the medical pathology-focused convention, raised consciousness about the human being positioned as the center of possibilities (Duhl, 1989), and rallied a sizable following that has a groundswell effect to this day. She wrote for the general public in a manner she hoped would be

accessible even to those with an elementary school education (S. Loeschen, personal communication, February 9, 2016), reaching millions across the globe.

THE ACADEMIC ENTERPRISE

The academic enterprise has a different agenda and rules of the game. Its goal is to advance knowledge and create innovations. It values critical, refined thinking to analyze, synthesize, and ask new questions. Putting Satir’s work into this arena means opening up her work to a plurality of interpretations, reworkings, and formulations. Witness the proliferation of renditions, combinations, and applications of the current vogue of mindfulness or the varieties of cognitive-behavioral therapies or, in an earlier era, the branches of neo-Freudian psychodynamic schools. Academic scholarship thrives on diversity and debate for its growth.

CONGRUENCE: THE LIFE HISTORY OF A CONCEPT

Satir’s work has many components and facets that are hard to systematize, as Wretman rightly noted. In contemporary family therapy circles, Satir’s work has been viewed as a collection of creative techniques but lacking in theoretical substance and a structured guide for clinical application (Brubacher, 2006; Nichols, 2013). As a creative process practitioner, Satir viewed her model as a work-in-progress. She eschewed viewing her family therapy as a “rigid model that cannot be altered or varied” (Satir, 1983, p. 229), but rather one that always invites future development. A model or a concept is not a static entity. It has its own developmental history. Scholarship requires that we carefully identify and trace the unfolding storylines and milestones in the evolution and branches of a model through the appropriations of successive scholars (Greenhalgh et al., 2005).

An example is the concept of congruence cited as a core Satir construct in the article. Congruence has a long history in the humanistic tradition that

can be traced back to Rogers (1957), a concept that has claimed the exploration of many authors who fed into its evolution (Wyatt, 2001). Satir herself has given multiple definitions to *congruence*, including straight communication, state of wholeness, and connection with a universal life force (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991). A conceptual advancement and integration of Satir's congruence was formulated and explicated by Lee (2001, 2002a), who delineated it as an integration of three human dimensions: "intrapsychic, interpersonal, and universal-spiritual" (Lee, 2002a, p. 64), paralleling the existential philosophy of wholeness by Tillich (1967). This three-dimensional conceptualization of congruence formed the basis of the Congruence Scale (Lee, 2002b). A fourth "intergenerational" dimension was added based on Lee's empirical clinical case studies (Lee, 2009, 2015). *Congruence* was operationalized as "attending, awareness, acknowledgement, alignment" in a structured congruence couple therapy model (Lee, 2009, p. 50) that has built an empirical base in addiction treatment (Lee & Awosoga, 2015; Lee & Rovers, 2008; Pinquart, Oslejssek, & Teubert, 2016).

In terms of evidence-based models, Sexton, Weeks, and Robbins (2003) suggested that we have moved beyond an era of research on family therapy as a generic modality and broad theoretical approaches to a more contemporary focus on greater treatment specificity on what specific model works for which problem and under what context. As such, Lee's work contributed both conceptual and empirical advancement and value added to Satir's work. With regard to literature review, Greenhalgh and colleagues (2005) proposed a more historically nuanced and refined approach of a meta-narrative review that scrutinizes the lens brought by a line of work of a researcher or group of researchers that differentiates them (a) conceptually (important objects of study), (b) theoretically (relationship among objects of study), (c) methodologically (ways in which problems are investigated), and (d) instrumentally (tools and techniques that are developed). For example, scholars and researchers will have their different conceptualization and interpretations of congruence and what they consider germane among Satir's ideas as well as ways these can be operationalized. Academic integrity requires that each scholar and researcher's work be differentiated and acknowledged in his or her own respective unfolding storylines.

EVOLVING SATIR

In our postmodern era, we recognize that a plurality of perspectives on any model is inevitable relative to the researchers' intellectual, cultural, disciplinary, and practice contexts, and this plurality is, in fact, invigorating. Rather than a plea to "save Satir," a call to "evolve Satir" may be a more galvanizing stance to tap into the creativity of a new generation of scholars, clinicians, and researchers. Diversity of conceptual and empirical innovations gives indications that Satir's ideas and legacy continue to have relevance today, as we strive to solve the problems that beset us in the 21st century. **SW**

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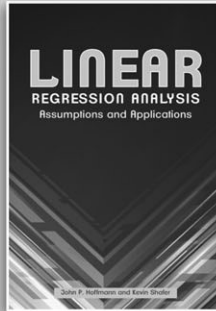
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